

THE EARTHLY PARADISE
IN TWELVE PARTS

THE EARTHLY
PARADISE: A POEM
BY WILLIAM MORRIS

PART XI

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS
THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

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JANUARY

FROM this dull rainy undersky and low,
This murky ending of a leaden day,
That never knew the sun, this half-thawed snow,
These tossing black boughs faint against the grey
Of gathering night, thou turnest, dear, away
Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile
Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.

There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without
And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed—
O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt
Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!
O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed
On mine a moment! O come back again
Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain!

Nay, nay, gone by! though there she sitteth sti
With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless—
Be patient, heart, thy days they yet shall fill
With utter rest—Yea, now thy pain they bless,
And feed thy last hope of the world's redress—
O unseen hurrying rack! O wailing wind!
What rest and where go ye this night to find?

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

THE year has changed its name since that last tale ;
Yet nought the prisoned spring doth that avail.
Deep buried under snow the country lies ;
Made dim by whirling flakes the rook still flies
South-west before the wind ; noon is as still
As midnight on the southward-looking hill,
Whose slopes have heard so many words and loud
Since on the vine the woolly buds first showed.
The raven hanging o'er the farmstead gate,
While for another death his eye doth wait,
Hears but the muffled sound of crowded byre
And winds' moan round the wall. Up in the spire
The watcher set high o'er the half-hid town
Hearkens the sound of chiming bells fall down
Below him ; and so dull and dead they seem
That he might well-nigh be amidst a dream
Wherein folk hear and hear not.

Such a tide,
With all work gone from the hushed world outside,
Still finds our old folk living, and they sit
Watching the snow-flakes by the window flit
Midmost the time 'twixt noon and dusk ; till now
One of the elders clears his knitted brow,
And says :

“ Well, hearken of a man who first
In every place seemed doomed to be accursed ;

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To tell about his ill hap lies on me ;
Before the winter is quite o'er, maybe
Some other mouth of his good hap may tell ;
But no third tale there is, of what befell
His fated life, when he had won his place ;
And that perchance is not so ill a case
For him and us ; for we may rise up, glad
At all the rest and triumph that he had
Before he died ; while he, forgetting clean
The sorrow and the joy his eyes had seen,
Lies quiet and well famed—and serves to-day
To wear a space of winter-tide away."

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

ARGUMENT

HIPPONOÛS, son of Glaucus King of Corinth, unwittingly slew his brother Beller, and, fleeing from his country, came to Prætus King of Argos, who purified him of his guilt; and thereafter was he called Bellerophon. He dwelt long with Prætus, well loved by him, and receiving many good things at his hands; but at last he lost the King's favour by the guile of the Queen Sthenobœa, and was sent to Jobates King of Lycia, her father, with a covert message of evil.

PRÆTUS, the King of Argos, on a day
In tangled forests drave the boar to bay,
And had good hap, for ere the noon was o'er
He set his foot upon the third huge boar
His steel that day had reached; then, fain of rest,
The greensward 'neath the spreading oak-trees pressed,
And, king-like, feasted with his folk around.
Nor lacked he for sweet music's measured sound,
For when somewhat were men's desires appeased
Of meat and drink, their weary limbs well eased,
There 'gan an ancient hunter and his son
To tell of glorious deeds in old days done
Within the wood; but as Lyæus' gift,
And measured words from common life did lift
The thoughts of men, and noble each man seemed

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Unto his fellow, from afar there gleamed
Sun-litten arms, and 'twixt the singer's word
The slow tramp of a great horse soon they heard,
And from a glade that pierced the thicket through
In sight at last a mounted man there drew.
Then the dogs growled, and midst their weapons' clang
Unto their feet the outmost hunters sprang,
Handling their spears ; but still King Proetus lay,
Till nigh the circle that lone man made stay,
And with wild eyes gazed down upon the throng.
Wearied he seemed, and his black war-horse strong
On many a mile had left both sweat and blood,
And panting now with drooping head he stood,
Forgetting all the eager joys of speed ;
And tattered was his rider's lordly weed,
His broken sheath now held a sword no more,
With rust his armour bright was spotted o'er,
Unkempt and matted was the yellow hair
That crowned his head, nor was there helmet there ;
His face, that should have been as fair and bright
And ruddy as a maid's, was deadly white,
And drawn and haggard ; and his grey eyes stared,
As though of something he were sore afraid
That other folk saw not at all. But now
A hunter cried out, "Nay, and who art thou ?
What God or man pursues thee ? bide and speak ;
Nor yet shalt thou for nought the King's rest break."
A scared look did the man behind him fling,
Then said, "Stand close around me : to your King,
When I may see him, will I tell the tale ;
Unless indeed, meanwhile, my life should fail."

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

With that, as one who hath but little might,
From off his wearied steed did he alight.
They led him to the King, who 'gainst a tree
Stood upright now, the new-come man to see ;
Who brought unto him would not meet his eyes,
But stood and stared distraught in dreamy wise ;
Till cheerily the King of Argos said,
" Cast somewhat off, O friend, thy drearyhead ;
Sit thee and eat and drink, and be my guest ;
I will not harm thee though thou be unblest ;
Let Gods or men take vengeance as they can,
Nor ask my help, who dwell a peaceful man
'Twiixt white-walled Argos and the rustling trees."

The man turned round, as asking what were these,
The words he said ; then, casting here and there
A troubled look, as if not safe he were
From some dread thing that followed even yet,
He sat him down, and like a starved man ate :
Yet did he tremble as he took the food,
And in the cup he gazed, as though the blood
Of man it held, and not the blood of earth,
The stirrer up to kindly words and mirth.

But when his hunger now was satisfied,
Casting his hair aback the King he eyed,
And in a choked and husky voice he said :
" Now can ye see, O folk, I am not dead ;
But tell me, King, how shall I name thee here,
Since he in whose heart lieth any prayer,
To nameless Gods will let no warm words flow ? "

" To Prætus pray for what thou wouldest now,"
The King said ; " by the soil of Argos pray :

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

To no light matter will I say thee nay,
For my heart giveth to thee: name thy name,
And say whereby these evils on thee came."

With changing eyes now gazed the outcast man
On Prætus' cheery face, and colour ran
O'er his wan visage. "Thou art kind," he said;
"But kinder eyes I knew, that on the dead
Must look for ever now; and joy is gone:
Best hadst thou cast forth such a luckless one;
For what I love I slay, and what I hate
I strive to save from out the hands of Fate.
Listen and let me babble: I have seen
Since that hour was, nought but the long leaves green,
The tree-trunks, and the scared things of the wood."

Then silently awhile he seemed to brood
O'er what had been, but even as the King
Opened his lips to mind him of the thing
That he should tell, from his bent head there came
Slow words, as if from one confessing shame,
While nigher to his mouth King Prætus drew.

"Hipponoüs men have called me, ere I knew
The hate of Gods and fear of men; my life
Went past at Corinth free from baneful strife,
For there my father ruled from sea to sea,
Glaucus the Great: and fair Eurymede,
My mother, bare another son to him,
Like unto me in mind and face and limb,
Whom men called Beller; and most true it is
That I with him dwelt long in love and bliss,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

However long ago that seems to be.
What plans we laid for joyous victory !
What lovely lands untilld we thought to win,
And be together even as Gods therein,
Bringing the monsters of the world to nought !
How eagerly from old men news we sought
Of lands that lay anigh the ocean-stream !
And yet withal what folly then did seem
Their cold words and their weary hopeless eyes,
When this alone of all things then seemed wise,
To know how sweet life was, how dear the earth,
And only fluttering hope stayed present mirth—
Ah, how I babble ! What a thing man is,
Who, falling unto misery out of bliss,
Thinks that new wisdom but the sole thing then
That binds the many ways of toiling men !

“In one fair chamber did we sleep a-night,
I and my brother—there, ’twixt light and light,
Three nights together did I dream a dream,
Where lying on my bed I still did seem
E’en as I was indeed, when a cold hand
Was laid upon me, and a shape did stand
By my bed-head, a woman clad in grey,
Like to the lingering time ’twixt night and day,
And veiled her face was, and her tall gaunt form.
She drew me from my peaceful bed and warm,
And led me, shuddering, bare-foot, o’er the floor,
Until, with beating heart, I stood before
My brother’s bed, and knew what I should do ;
For from beneath her shadowy robe she drew

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

A well-steeled feathered dart, and that must I,
Casting all will aside, clutch mightily,
And, still unable with her will to strive,
E'en as her veiled hand pointed, madly drive
Into the heart of mine own mother's son,
Striving to scream as that ill deed was done.

“No cry came forth, but even with the stroke,
With sick and fainting heart, I nigh awoke.
And when the dream again o'er me was cast,
Chamber, and all I knew, away had passed,
Nor saw I more the ghost: alone I stood
In a strange land, anigh an oaken wood
High on a hill; and far below my feet
The white walls of a glorious town did meet
A yellow strand and ship-beset green sea;
And all mought was as a toy for me,
For I was king thereof and great enow.

“But as I stood upon that hill's green brow,
Rejoicing much, yet yearning much indeed
For something past that still my heart must need,
Once more was all changed; by the windy sea
Did men hold games with great solemnity
In honour of some hero passed away,
Whose body dead upon a huge pile lay
Waiting the torch, and people far and wide
About the strand a name I knew not cried,
Lamenting him who once had been their king;
But when I saw the face of the dead thing
Over whose head so many a cry was thrown
On to the wind, I knew it for mine own.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“Cold pangs shot through me then, sleep’s bonds
I broke;

Shuddering with terror in my bed I woke,
And when thought came again, a weight of fear
Lay on my heart and still grew heavier ;
But when the next night and the third night came,
And still in sleep my visions were the same,
No longer in mine own heart could I hold
The story of that marvel quite untold,
For fear possessed me : good at first it seemed
That I should tell the dream so strangely dreamed
Unto my brother ; then I feared that he
Might for that tale look with changed eyes on me
As deeming that some secret hope had wrought
Within my false heart, and that pageant brought
Before mine eyes ; or he might flee the land
To save our house from some accursed hand ;
And either way that dream seemed hard to tell
That yet, untold, made for my soul a hell.

“But of a certain elder now I thought,
Who much of lore to both of us had taught,
And loved us well ; Diana’s priest was he,
And in the wild woods served her faithfully,
Dwelling with few folk in her woodland shrine,
That from the hillside such a man sees shine
As goes from Corinth unto Sicyon.

“And now amid these thoughts was night nigh done,
And the dawn glimmered ; I grew hot to go
To that old priest these troublous things to show ;
So from my bed I rose up silently,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

And with all haste I did my weed on me,
And went unto the door; but as I passed
The fair porch through, I saw how 'gainst the last
Brass-adorned pillar lay a feathered dart;
And therewith came new fear into my heart,
For as the dart that I in dreams had seen
So was it fashioned, and with feathers green
And scarlet was the hinder end bedight,
And round the shaft were bands of silver white.
Then scarcely did I know if still I dreamed,
Yet, looking at the shaft, withal it seemed
Good unto me to take it in my hand,
That the old man the more might understand
How real my dream had been in very deed,
And give me counsel better to my need.

“With that I caught it up, and went my way
And almost ere the sun had made it day
Was I within the woods, and hastening on,
Afire until the old man's house were won,
And like a man who walks in sleep I went
Nor noted aught amid my strong intent.

“But when I reached the little forest fane
I found my labour had but been in vain;
For there the priest's folk told me he had gone
The eve before to Corinth, all alone,
And on some weighty matter, as they deemed;
For measurelessly troubled still he seemed.
His trouble troubled me, because I thought
That unto him sure knowledge had been brought
Of some great danger hanging over me,
And that he thither went my face to see,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

While I was seeking him ; and therewithal
Great fear and heaviness on me did fall ;
And all the life I once had thought so sweet
Now seemed a troublous thing and hard to meet.

“So cityward again I set my face,
And through the woodland glades I rode apace,
And halfway betwixt dawn and noon had I
Unto the wood's edge once more come anigh ;
And now upon the wind I seemed to hear
The sound of mingled voices drawing near ;
Whereon I stayed to hearken and cried out,
But feeble was the sound from my parched throat ;
And listening afterward I heard not now
Those sounds, and timorous did my faint heart grow,
And tales of woodfolk my vexed mind did take.
But just as I the well-wrought reins would shake,
Grown nigher did I hear those sounds again,
And drew aback the hand that held the rein,
And even therewith stalked forth into the way
From out the thicket a huge wolf and grey,
And stood with yellow eyes that glared on me ;
And I stared too ; my folly made me see
No wolf, but some dread deity, in him ;
But trembling as I was in every limb,
E'en as his growling smote upon my heart,
Tighter my fingers clutched the dreadful dart,
I made a shift in stirrups up to stand,
And hurled the quivering shaft from out my hand ;
Then fire seemed all around me, and a pang
Crushed down my heart as from the thicket rang
A dreadful cry : clear saw I, even as he

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Who meets the Father's visage suddenly ;
No wolf was there ; but o'er the herbage ran
With staggering steps a pale and bleeding man :
His left hand on the shaft, whose banded wood
Over the barbs within his bosom stood,
His right hand raised against me, as he fell
Close to my horse-hoofs ; and I knew full well
That this my brother's last farewell should be,
And thus his face henceforward should I see.

“ What else ? it matters not ; the priest I saw,
And armed men from the thicket toward me draw,
With scared eyes fixed on mine ; I drew my sword,
And sat there, waiting for a dreadful word,
Bidding the rush of many men on me ;
But they began to draw round silently,
And ere the circle yet was fully made,
I, who at first might even thus have stayed
For death and curses, felt the love of life
Stir up my heart again to hope and strife ;
Yea, even withal I saw in one bright gleam
The latter ending of my dreaded dream.
So, crying out, strongly my horse I spurred,
And as he, rearing up, dashed forth, I heard
Clatter of arms and cries, a spear flew o'er
My bended head, a well-aimed arrow tore
My helm therefrom ; yet then a cry there came :
‘ Take him alive, nor bring a double shame
Upon the great house ! ’ Even therewith I drave
Against a mighty man as wave meets wave ;
Back flew my right arm, and my sword was gone,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Whirled off as from a sling the wave-worn stone,
And my horse reeled, but he before me lay
Rolled over, horse and man, and in my way
Was no one now, as I spurred madly on :
And so in no long time the race I won,
For nobly was I mounted ; and I deem
That to the most of those men did it seem
No evil thing that I should ride away.

“ O King, I think this happed but yesterday,
And now already do I deem that I
Did no good deed in seeking not to die,
For I am weary, and the Gods made me
A luckless man among all folk to be—
I care not if their purpose I undo,
Since now I doubt not that the thing is so—
—And yet am I so made, that, having life,
Must I, though ever worsted in the strife,
Cling to it still too much to gain the rest
Which yet I know of all things is the best.
Then slay me, King ! lo now, I pray for this,
And no least portion of thy hoarded bliss ;
Slay me, and let the oak-boughs say their say
Over my bones through the wild winter day !
Slay me, for I am fain thereto to go,
Where no talk is of either bliss or woe.”

“ Nay,” said the King, “ didst thou not eat and drink
When hunger drave thee e’ennow ? yea, and shrink
When my men’s spears were pointed at thy breast ?
Be patient ; thou indeed shalt gain thy rest,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

But many a thing has got to come ere then :
For all things die, and thou midst other men
Shalt scarce remember thou hast had a friend.
At worst before thou comest to the end
Joy shalt thou have, and sorrow : wherefore come
With me thou well mayst have no hapless home.
Dread not the Gods ; ere long time has gone by
Thy soul from all guilt will we purify,
And sure no heavy curse shall lie on thee.
Nay, did their anger cause this thing to be ?
Perchance in heaven they smile upon thy gain—
—Lo, for a little while a burning pain,
Then yearning unfulfilled a little space,
Then tender memories of a well-loved face
In quiet hours, and then—forgetfulness—
How hadst thou rather borne, still less and less
To love what thou hadst loved, till it became
A thing to be forgotten, a great shame
To think thou shouldst have wasted life thereon ?
Come then—thou spakest of a kingdom won
Thy dream foretold, and shall not this be too,
E'en as the dreadful deed thou cam'st to do ?
To horse ! and unto Argos let us wend,
Begin thy life afresh with me for friend.
Wide is the world, nor yet for many a day
Will every evil thing be cleared away
That bringeth scathe to men within its girth ;
Surely a man like thee can win the mirth
That cometh of the conquering of such things ;
For not in vain art thou the seed of kings
Unless thy face belie thee—nay, no more :

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Why speak I vain words to a heart still sore
With sudden death of happiness? yet come
And ride with us unto our lovely home."

Hipponoüs to the King's word answered nought,
But sat there brooding o'er his dreary thought,
Nor seemed to hear ; and when the Argive men
Brought up to him his battle-steed again,
Scarce witting of the company or place,
He mounted, and with set and weary face
Rode as they bade him at the King's left hand :
Nor did the sight of the fair well-tilled land,
When that they gained from out the tangled wood,
Do aught in dealing with his mournful mood ;
Nor Argos' walls as from the fields they rose,
Such good things with their mightiness to close
From chance of hurt ; scarce saw he the fair gate,
Dainty to look on, yet so huge of weight ;
Nor did the streets' well-ordered houses draw
His eyes to look at them ; unmoved he saw
The south-land merchants' dusky glittering train ;
About the fountain the slim maids in vain
Drew sleek arms from the water, or turned round
With shaded eyes at the great horn's hoarse sound.
The sight of the King's house, deemed of all men
A wonder mid the houses kings had then,
Drew from him but a troubled frown, as though
Men's toilsome folly he began to know ;
The carven Gods within the banquet-hall,
The storied hangings that bedight the wall,
Made his heart sick to think of labour vain,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Telling once more the oft-told tale of pain.
Cold in the damsel's hand his strong hand lay,
When to the steaming bath she led the way ;
And when another damsel brought for him
Raiment wherein the Tyrian dye showed dim
Amid the gold lines of the broideries,
Her face downcast because she might not please,
He heeded not. When to the hall he passed,
And by the high seat he was set at last,
Then Prætus, smiling from his mild eyes, laid
A hand upon his combed-out hair and said :

“Surely for no good luck this golden hair
Has come to Argos, and this visage fair,
To make us, who were well enow before,
Seem to our maids like churls at the hall-door,
Prying about when men to war are gone
And girls and children sit therein alone.”

But nought Hipponoüs heeded the King's say,
But, turning, roughly put his hand away,
And frowning muttered, and still further drew,
As a man touched amid his dream might do.

In sooth he dreamed, and dreary was his dream ;
A bitter thing the world to him did seem ;
The void of life to come he peopled now
With folk of scornful eyes and brazen brow ;
And one by one he told the tale of days
Wherein an envious mock was the world's praise ;
Where good deeds brought ill fame, and truth was not,
Hate was remembered, love was soon forgot ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

No face was good for long to look upon,
And nought was worthy when it once was won ;
But narrow, helpless, friendless was the way,
That led unto the last most hopeless day
Of hopeless days, in tangled, troubled wise.
So thought he, till the tears were in his eyes
Since he was young yet, for hope lying dead.

But on his fixed eyes and his weary head
The happy King of Argos gazed awhile,
Till from his eye faded the scornful smile
That lingered on his lips ; and now he turned,
As one who long ago that task had learned,
And unto the great men about him spoke,
And was a merry king of merry folk.

So passed the feast and all men drew to sleep,
And e'en Hipponoüs his soul might steep
In sweet forgetfulness a little while ;
And somewhat did the fresh young day beguile
His treasured sorrow when he woke next morn,
And somewhat less he felt himself forlorn :
Nor did the King forget him, but straight sent
Unto the priests, and told them his intent
That this his guest should there be purified,
Since he with honour in his house should bide.

So was Jove's house made ready for that thing,
And thither amid songs and harp-playing,
White-robed and barefoot, was Hipponoüs brought
Who, bough in hand, for peace that God besought.
Noiseless the white bulls fell beneath the stroke

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Of the gold-girdled, well-taught temple folk :
Up to the roof arose the incense-cloud ;
The chanted prayer of men, now low now loud,
Thrilled through the brazen leaves of the great door ;
Thick lay the scattered herbs upon the floor,
And in the midst at last the hero stood,
Freed of the guilt of shedding kindred blood.
And then the chief priest cried, " Bellerophon,
With this new hapless name that thou hast won,
Go forth, go free, be happy once again,
But no more called Hipponoüs of men."

Then forth Bellerophon passed wearily,
Although so many prayers had set him free ;
Yet somewhat was he ready to forget,
And turn unto the days that might be yet.

But when before King Prætus' throne he came,
The King called out on him by his new name ;
" O fair Bellerophon, like me, be wise,
And set things good to win before thine eyes,
Lands, and renown, and riches, and a life
That knows from day to day so much of strife
As makes men happy, since the age of gold
Is past, if e'er it was, as a tale told."

" O King," he said, " thou sittest in full day,
Thou strivest to put thoughts of night away ;
My life has not yet left the morning-tide,
And I, who find the world that seemed so wide,
Now narrowed to a little troublous space
Where help is not, astonied turn my face

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Unto the coming hours, nor know at all
What thing of joy or hope to me will fall.
Be patient, King ; perchance within a while
No marfeast I may be, but learn to smile
Even as thou, who lovest life so much.
Who knows but grief may vanish at a touch,
As joy does ? and a long way off is death :
Some folk seem glad even to draw their breath."

"Yea," said the King, "thou hast it, for indeed
I fain would live, like most men—but what need
Unto a fevered man to talk of wine ?
Thy heart shall love life when it grows like mine.
But come thou hence, and I will show to thee
What things of price the Gods have given to me.
Not good it is to harp on the frayed string ;
And thou, so seeing many a lovely thing,
Mayst hide thy weary pain a little space."

And therewith did King Prætus from that place
Draw forth Bellerophon, and so when he
In his attire was now clad royally,
From out the precinct to his palace fair
Did the King bring him ; and he showed him there
His stables, where the war-steeds stood arow
Over the dusty grain : then did they go
To armouries, where sword and spear and shield
Hung bloodless, ready for the fated field :
The treasury showed he, where things richly wrought
Together into such a place were brought,
That he who stole the oxen of a God,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

For all his godlike cunning scarce had trod
Untaken on its floor—withal he showed
The chamber where the broidered raiment glowed,
Where the spice lay, and scented unguents fit
To touch Queen Venus' skin and brighten it ;
The ivory chairs and beds of ivory
He showed him, and he bid his tired eyes see
The stories wrought on brazen doors, the flowers
And things uncouth carved on the wood of bowers ;
The painted walls that told things old and new,
Things come to pass, and things that onward drew.

But all the while Bellerophon's grave face
And soon-passed smile seemed unmeet for that place,
And ever Prætus felt a pang of fear,
As if it told of times a-drawing near,
When all the wealth and beauty that was his
Should not avail to buy one hour of bliss.
And sometimes when he watched his wandering eyes
And heard his stammering speech, would there arise
Within his heart a feeling like to hate,
Mingled with scorn of one so crushed by fate :
For ever must the rich man hate the poor.

Now at the last they stood without a door
Adorned with silver, wrought of precious wood ;
Then Prætus laughed, and said, " O guest, thy mood
Is hard to deal with ; never any leech
Has striven as I thy sickness' heart to reach ;
And I grow weary and must get me aid."

Therewith upon the lock his hand he laid

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And pushed the door aback, and then the twain
The daintiest of all passages did gain,
And as betwixt its walls they passed along
Nearer they drew unto the measured song
Of sweet-voiced women ; and the King spake then :
“ Drive fire out with fire, say all wise men ;
Here mayst thou set thine eyes on such an one,
That thou no more wilt think of days ago,
But days to come ; for here indeed my spouse
Watches the damsels in the weaving-house,
Or in the pleasance sits above their play ;
And certes here upon no long-passed day,
Unless my eyes were bleared with coming eld,
Fair sights for such as thou have I beheld.”

Across the exile's brow a frown there came,
As though his sorrow of such things thought shame,
Yet mayhap his eye brightened as he heard
The song grow louder and the hall they neared ;
But the King smiled, and swiftlier led him on,
Until unto the door thereof they won.

NOW noble was that hall and fair enow,
Betwixt whose slim veined pillars set arow,
And marble lattice wrought like flowering trees,
Showed the green freshness of the summer seas,
Made cheery by the sun and many a ship,
Whose black bows smoothly through the waves did slip.
In bowls whereon old stories pictured were
The bright rose-laurels trembled in the air

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

That from the sea stole through the lattices,
And round them hummed a few bewildered bees.

Midmost the pavement wrought by toil of years,
A tree was set, gold-leaved like that which bears
Unto the maids of Hesperus strange fruit ;
A many-coloured serpent from the root
Curled upward round the stem, and, reaching o'er
A four-square silver laver, did outpour
Bright glittering water from his throat of brass ;
And at each corner of the basin was
A brazen hart who seemed at point to drink ;
And these the craftsman had not made to shrink
Though in the midst Diana's feet pressed down
The forest greensward, and her girded gown
Cleared from the brambles fell about her thigh,
And eager showed her terrible bright eye.

But 'twixt the pillars and that marvellous thing
Were scattered those they had e'en now heard sing ;
Their song had sunk now, and a murmuring voice,
But mingled with the clicking loom's sharp noise
And splashing of the fountain, where a maid
With one hand lightly on a brass deer laid,
One clasped about her own foot, knelt to watch
Her brazen jar the tinkling water catch ;
Withal the wool-comb's sound within the fleece
Began and grew, and slowly did decrease,
And then began as still it gat new food ;
And by the loom an ancient woman stood
And grumbled o'er the web ; and on the floor
Ten spindles twisted ever ; from the store
Raised on high pillars at the gable end,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Adown a steep stair did a maiden wend,
Who in the wide folds of her gathered gown
Fresh yarn bright-dyed unto the loom bare down.

But on the downy cushions of a throne,
Above all this sat the fair Queen alone,
Who heeded not the work, nor noted aught ;
Nor showed indeed that there was any thought
Within her heaving breast ; but though she moved
No whit the limbs a God might well have loved,
Although her mouth was as of one who lies
In peaceful sleep ; though over her deep eyes
No shadow came to trouble her white brow,
Yet might you deem no rest was on her now ;
Rather too weary seemed she e'en to sigh
For foolish life that joyless passed her by.

So thus the King Bellerophon led in
Just as the old song did once more begin
From the slim maids, that by the loom's side spun.
But ere it had full sway, the nighest one
Unto the door stopped singing suddenly,
And pressed her neighbour's arm, that she might see
What new folk were come in ; and therewithal
An angry glance from the Queen's eyes did fall
Upon the maid ; so that Bellerophon
A cruel visage had to look upon,
When first he saw the Queen raised high above
The ordered tresses of that close of love.

But when the women knew the King indeed
They did him reverence, and with lowly heed
Made way for him, while a girl here and there

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Made haste to hide what labour had made bare
Of limb or breast ; and the King smiled through all,
And now and then a wandering glance let fall
Upon some fairest face ; and so at last
Through the sweet band unto the Queen they passed
Who rose and waited them by her fair throne
With eyes wherefrom all care once more had gone
Of life and what it brought : then the King said—

“ O Sthenobœa, hither have I led
A man, who, from a happy life down-hurled,
Looks with sick eyes upon this happy world ;
Not knowing how to stay here or depart :
Thou know'st and I know how the wounded heart
Forgetteth pain and groweth whole again,
Yet is the pain that passes no less pain.

“ But since this man is noble even as we,
And help begets help, and withal to me
Worthy he seems to be a great king's friend,
Now help me to begin to make an end
Of his so heavy mood ; for though indeed
This daintiness may nowise help his need,
Yet may kind words avail to make him kind
Unto himself ; kind eyes may make him blind
Unto the ugly, tangled whirl of life ;
Or in some measured image of real strife
He may forget the things that he has lost,
Nor think of how he needs must yet be tost
Like other men from wave to wave of fate.”

Gravely she set herself the end to wait
Of the King's speech ; and what of scorn might be

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Within her heart changed nowise outwardly
Her eyes that looked with scorn on everything ;
And yet withal while still the cheery King
Let his tale flow, unto the exile's place
She glanced with scornful wonder at his face
At first, because she deemed it soft and kind ;
Yet was he fair, and she—she needs must find
Something that drew her to his wide grey eyes ;
And presently as with some great surprise
Her heart 'gan beat, and she must strive in vain
To crush within it a sweet rising pain,
She deemed to be that pity that she knew
As the last folly wise folk turn unto.
For pain was wont to rouse her rage, and she
Was like those beasts that slaughter cruelly
Their wounded fellows—truth she knew not of,
And fain had killed folk babbling over love ;
Justice she thought of as a thing that might
Balk some desire of hers, before the night
Of death should end it all : nor hope she knew,
Nor what fear was, how ill soe'er life grew.

This wisdom had she more than most of folk,
That through the painted cloud of lies she broke
To gain what brought her pleasure for awhile,
However men might call it nought and vile ;
Nor was she one to make a piteous groan
O'er bitter pain amidst her pleasure grown.

But she was one of those wrought by the Gods
To be to foolish men as sharpest rods
To scourge their folly ; wrought so daintily

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

That scarcely could a man her body see
Without awaking strife 'twixt good and ill
Within him ; and her sweet, soft voice would fill
Men's hearts with strange desires, and her great eyes,
Truthful to show her to the cold and wise
E'en as she was, would make some cast aside
Whatever wisdom in their breasts might hide,
And still despite what long ill days might prove,
They called her languid hate the soul of love.

But now that fire that to her eyes arose
She cast aback awhile to lie all close
About her heart ; her full lips trembled not,
And from her cheek faded the crimson spot
That erst increased thereon.

“ O Prince,” she said,
“ Strive to get back again thy goodlihead ;
Life flitteth fast, and while it still abides,
Our folly many a good thing from us hides,
That else would pierce our hearts with its delight
Unto the quick, in all the Gods' despite.”

He gazed upon her wondering, for again
That new-born hope, that sweet and bitter pain,
Flushed her smooth cheek, and glittered in her eyes,
And wrought within her lips ; yet was she wise,
And gazing on his pale and wondering face,
In his frank eyes she did not fail to trace
A trouble like unto a growing hate,
That, yet unknown to him, her love did wait ;
Then once more did she smother up that flame,
Calm grew she, from her lips a false voice came.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“Yea, and bethink thee, mayst thou not be born
To raise the crushed and succour the forlorn,
And in the place of sorrow to set mirth,
Gaining a great name through the wondering earth?
Now surely has my lord the King done well
To bring thee here thy tale to me to tell;
Come, then, for near by such a bower there is
As most men deem to be a place of bliss;
There, when thy tale is o’er that I am fain
To hearken, may sweet music ease thy pain
Amidst our feast; or of these maids shall one
Read of some piteous thing the Gods have done
To us poor folk upon the earth that dwell.
Yea, and the reader will I choose so well,
That such an one herself shall seem to be
As she of whom the tale tells piteously.
And thou shalt hear when all is past and o’er,
And with its sorrow still thine heart is sore,
The Lydian flutes come nigher and more nigh,
Till glittering raiment cometh presently,
And thou behold’st the dance of the slim girls,
Wavering and strange as the leaf-wreath that whirls
Down in the marble court we walk in here
Mid sad October, when the rain draws near:
So delicate therewith, that when all sound
Of sobbing flute has left the air around,
And, panting, lean the dancers against wall
And well-wrought pillar, you hear nought at all
But their deep breathing, so are all men stilled,
So full their hearts with all that beauty filled.”

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Coldly and falsely was her speech begun,
But she waxed warm ere all the tale was done ;
Nay, something soft was in her voice at last,
As round his soul her net she strove to cast
Almost despite herself.

Unmoved he stood,
But that some thought did cross his weary mood
That made him knit his brow, and therewith came
A flush across his face as if of shame
Because of that new thought ; but when an end
Her speech had, then he spake :

“ What love or friend
Can do me good ? God-hated shall I be,
And bring to no man aught but misery ;
And thou, O royal man, and thou, O Queen,
Who heretofore in bliss and mirth have been,
Hearken my words, and on your heads be all
The trouble that from me shall surely fall
If I abide with you : yet doubt it not
That this your love shall never be forgot
Wherewith ye strive to win a helpless man,
And ever will I labour as I can
To make my ill forebodings come to nought.”

But midst these things, pleased by some hidden
thought,
The King smiled, turning curious eyes on them,
And smoothing down his raiment's golden hem
As one who hearkens music ; then said he,
“ Wilt thou give word for our festivity,
O Sthenobœa ? But come thou, O guest,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And by the great sea we will take our rest,
Speaking few words."

So from her golden throne
She passed to do what things must needs be done,
And with firm feet amidst her maids she went
On this new tyrannous sweetness all intent ;
So did it work in her, that scarcely she
Might bear the world now, as she turned to see
The stranger and the King a-going down
By marble stairs unto the foreshores brown.
So slipped the morn away, and when the sun
His downward course some three hours had begun,
Summoned by sound of horns they took their way
Unto a bower that looking westward lay,
Yet was by trellised roses shaded so
That little of the hot sun did it know
But what the lime-trees' honey-sweet scent told,
And their wide wind-stirred leaves, turned into gold
Against the bright rays of the afternoon.

So to that chamber came the fair Queen soon,
Well harbingered by flutes ; nor had she spared
To veil her limbs in raiment that had fared
O'er many a sea, before it had the hap
The Lycian's smooth skin in its folds to lap.
But as she entered there in queenly guise,
With firm and haughty step, and careless eyes
Over the half-hid beauty of her breast,
One moment on the exile did they rest,
And softened to a meek, imploring gaze—
One moment only ; as with great amaze

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

His eyes beheld her, doubtful what was there,
All had gone thence, but the proud empty stare
That she was wont to turn on everything.

Withal she sat her down beside the King,
And the feast passed with much of such delight
As makes to happy men the world seem bright,
But from the hapless draws but hate and scorn,
Because the Gods both happy and forlorn
Have set in one world, each to each to be
A vain rebuke, a bitter memory.

Yet the Queen held her word, and when that they
Had heard the music sing adown the day,
After the dancing women had but left
Sweet honeyed scents behind, or roses, reft
By their own hands from head or middle small,
Then came with hurried steps into the hall
The reader and her scroll; sweet-eyed was she,
And timid as some loving memory
Midst the world's clamour: clad in gown of wool
She sat herself adown upon a stool
Anigh the proud feet of the Lycian Queen,
And straight, as if no soul she there had seen,
With slender hand put back her golden hair,
And 'gan to read from off the parchment fair.
In a low voice, and trembling at the first,
She read a tale of lovers' lives accurst
By cruel Gods and careless foolish men:
Like dainty music was her voice, and when
From out her heart she sighed, as she must read
Of folk unholpen in their utmost need,
Still must the stranger turn kind eyes on her.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

At last awhile she paused, as she drew near
The bitter end of spilt and wasted bliss,
And death unblessed at last by any kiss;
Her voice failed, and adown her book did sink,
And midst them all awhile she seemed to think
Of the past days herself; but still so much
Her beauty and the tale their hearts did touch,
Folk held their breath till she began again,
And something 'twixt a pleasure and a pain
It was when all the sweet tale was read o'er
And her voice quivered through the air no more.

Then round the maiden's neck King Præetus cast
A golden chain, and from the hall she passed,
And yet confused and shamefaced; for the Queen,
Who at the first the Prince's eyes had seen
Upon the maid, and then would look no more,
But kept her eyes fixed on the marble floor
As listening to the tale, her head now raised,
And with cold scorn upon the maiden gazed
As she bent down the golden gift to take;
And meanwhile, for her tender beauty's sake,
Over the exile's face a pleased smile came.

But she departed to the bliss or shame
Life had for her, and all folk left the bower;
For now was come the summer night's mid-hour:
The great high moon that lit the rippling sea
'Twixt the thin linden-trees shone doubtfully
Upon the dim grey garden; the sea-breeze
Stooped down on the pleached alleys; the tall trees
Over the long roofs moved their whispering leaves,
Nor woke the dusky swifts beneath the eaves.

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

NOW from that fair night wore the time away,
Until with lapse of many a quiet day,
And stirring times withal, Bellerophon
To love of life and hope of joy was won.
Still grave and wise he was beyond his years,
No eager man among his joyous peers
To snatch at pleasure ; careful not to cheat
His soul with vain desires all over sweet ;
A wary walker on the road of life ;
E'en as a man who in a garden, rife
With flowers, has gone unarmed, and found that there
Are evil things amid the blossoms fair,
And paid with wounds for folly : yet when he
Is whole once more, since there he needs must be,
And has no will its sweets to cast aside,
Well armed he walks there ware of beasts that hide
Beneath the shade of those vine-trellises,
Amid the grey stems of the apple-trees.

Yet at his heart, about the root of it
Strange thoughts there lay, which at sweet times would
fit

Before his eyes, as things grown palpable ;
Strange hopes that made the weltering world seem well
While he abode there : therefore was he kind
To man and maid, and all men's hearts did bind
With bonds of love, for mid the struggling folk,
The forgers and the bearers of the yoke,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Weary with wronging and with wrongs, he seemed
As one on whom a light from heaven had beamed,
That changed him to a god yet being alive.

But midst all folk there did King Prætus give
Great gifts to him ; great trust in him he had,
And ever by his sight was he made glad :
For well did all things prosper in his hand,
Nor was there such another in the land
For strength or goodliness.

Now so it was,
That he on matters of the King would pass
About the country here and there, nor dwell
At Argos much, and that thing pleased him well ;
For while all else grew better, ye shall know
That greater in his heart the fear did grow
That sprung up therein on that summer eve ;
And though sometimes the Queen would make believe
To heed him nought—yea, or depart maybe
At whiles, when he the King would come to see—
Yet was this but at whiles ; the next day came,
And scarce would she hold parley with her shame.

One noon of the late autumn, when the sun
Brightened the parting year, so nearly done,
With rays as hot as early June might shed,
Dawn past an hour, upon the tulip-bed,
In the great pleasance, 'neath a wall of yew,
Walked the Corinthian, pondering what to do
In some great matter late given unto him.
So clad he was, that both on breast and limb
Steel glittered, though his head as yet was bare ;
But in his face was just so much of care

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

As seemed to show he had got that to do
He feared but little well to carry through,
But which must have his heed a little while :
And still in going would he stop and smile,
And seem to cast the shreds of thought away
In honour of the bright fresh autumn day
And all the pleasure of the lovely place.

But at the last, turning about his face
Unto the sunny garden's other side,
He saw where, down a grassy path and wide,
The Queen came, with her head bent down to earth,
As though mid thoughts she were that slew her mirth ;
Slowly she went, with two maids following her,
Who in their delicate slim hands did bear,
The one a cithern and some verse-book old,
The other a white osier maund, to hold
Some of such flowers as still in fear and doubt
Against the sickness of the year held out.

But as they went, nigh to the Prince they drew,
And soon the maidens' eyes his beauty knew,
And one at other glanced, smiling and glad,
For soft love of him in their hearts they had ;
Yet nought they said, nor did the Queen turn round,
But kept her eyes still bent upon the ground.
So in their walk they came to where there stood
A thin-leaved apple-tree, where, red as blood,
Yellow as gold, a little fruit hung yet,
The last rays of the fainting sun to get ;
And a tall clump of autumn flowers, cold-grey,
Beneath it, mocked the promise of the day,
And to them clung a hapless bee or twain,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

A butterfly spread languid wings in vain
Unto the sun, that scarce could heat her now.

There the Queen stayed awhile her footsteps slow,
And to the flowers wandered her slender hand ;
But with her eyes cast down she still did stand,
And pondered.

Full of melody and peace
About her was the lingering year's decease ;
Strange spicy scents there were that yet were sweet,
Green was the grass about her gold-shod feet,
And had no memory of the dawn's white rime ;
Loud was the birds' song in that windless time,
Strange the sharp crying of the missel-thrush
Within the close heart of the hawthorn-bush,
Strange the far-off rooks' sweet tumultuous voice
That in the high elms e'en now must rejoice
And know not why—peace e'en if end of peace.

The while her burning heart did never cease
To give words to such longings, as she knew
To swift destruction all her glory drew.

“ Ah ! mine, mine, mine ! ” she thought, “ ah ! mine
a while !

Ah ! mine a little day, if all be vile
That coming years can bring unto my heart !
Ah ! mine this eve, if we to-morn must part !
Mine, that a sweet hour I may know at last
How soon soever all delight is passed !
Ah ! mine, mine, mine, if for a little while ! ”

So stood she, that her parted lips did smile
As if of one that memories make half sad,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Her breast heaved, as no stronger wish she had
Than for some careless lover, lightly won,
And soon forgot, to lay his lips thereon ;
The flower-stem that her finger-tips did hold
Was crushed not, and within her shoe of gold
Lightly her foot was laid upon the grass ;
No tremors through her dainty limbs did pass,
And healthy life alone did paint her cheek :
For if indeed at first she had felt weak,
Ere well she knew what she was bent upon,
Now at the last, when every doubt was gone,
She would not show the net unto the prey
Until she deemed that in her toils he lay.

She raised her eyes at last with a light sigh,
Despite herself, a flush passed suddenly
Over her face, and then all pale she grew ;
For now withal Bellerophon she knew,
Though at that very point of time the sun
Along his upraised steel-clad arm had run,
And made an earthly sun that dazzled her.
Yet cast she back her trembling hope and fear
Into her heart, and as before she went
Slowly, with head a little downward bent,
But when she had gone on a few yards space,
Once more unto the Prince she raised her face ;
Then stopped again, and turning round, she said,
From lips wherein all passion now seemed dead :
“ Damsels, get home again ; thou, Mysian, go
Unto the little treasury thou dost know
Anigh my bower, and taking this gold key,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Draw forth that ancient prophet's book for me
Which shows the stars : for that I fain would show
To Prince Bellerophon, who bides me now
Ere he goes forth to bring the island folk
Once more beneath King Prætus' equal yoke.
And thou, Leucippe, bide our coming there,
And bid our folk set forth a feast as fair
As may be done ; for we within a while
May need thy cithern dull thoughts to beguile."

E'en as they turned she passed on carelessly
Unto the Prince, nor looked aback to see
That they were gone ; but he indeed had heard
Through the calm air her clearly-spoken word,
And saw the maidens go, and felt as one
Who bideth, when the herald's speech is done,
The word that bids the grinded spears fall down.
But she, with slim hand folded in her gown,
Went o'er the dewy grass to where he stood,
And in despite the fire within her blood
Was calm, and smiled on him, till nigh he thought
That surely all his fear was vain and nought.

He bowed before her as she drew anear,
But she held out her right hand, and in clear
Sweet tones she cried, "O fair Bellerophon,
Would that the victory were already won,
And thou wert back again at this thy home
We have made glad for thee : behold ! I come
To say farewell—yet come a little way—
For something else indeed I had to say."

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

And still she held his hand, but yet durst not
Clasp as she would the treasure she had got.

Then to a place together did they pass,
Where yew-trees hemmed around a plot of grass,
And kept it scarce touched by the faint sun's rays—
A place well made for burning summer days,
But cheerless now. There on a marble seat
She bade him sit; while she with restless feet
Paced to and fro, while from the yew-twigs close,
With his scared cry the creeping blackbird rose.
But he, with eyes cast down upon the ground,
Deemed that his battle easier would be found
Than this.

And so at last she stayed by him
And cried: "The cup is full unto the brim;
For now thou goest where thou mayst be slain:
I speak then—and, alas! I speak in vain—
Thy cold eyes tell me so—How shall I move
Thy flinty heart my curse has made me love?
For what have other women done, when they
Were fair as I, and love before them lay?
Was not a look enough for them, a word
Low murmured, midst the hum of men scarce heard?
What have I left undone that they have done?
What askest thou of me, O heart of stone?"

Choked by her passion here awhile she stayed,
And he from off the bench sprang up dismayed,
And turned on her to speak; but she withal
Before him on her knees made haste to fall,
And cried out loud and shrilly: "Nay, nay, nay—

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Say not the word thou art about to say ;
Let me depart, and things be still as now ;
So that my dreams sweet images may show,
As they have done—that waking I may think,
' If he, my love, from looks of love did shrink,
That was because I had not prayed him then
To be my love alone of living men ;
Because he did not know that I, a Queen,
Who hitherto but loveless life have seen,
Could kneel to him, and pray upon my knees
To give me my first pleasure, my first peace'—
Thou knewest not—nay, nay, thou know'st not now—
Thou with the angry eyes and bended brow !—
Surely I talk my mother-tongue no more,
Therefore thou knowest not that I implore
Thy pity, that I give myself to thee,
Thy love, thy slave, thy castaway to be—
Hear'st thou ? thy castaway ! when in a while
Thou growest weary of my loving smile !
Oh, take me, madman ! In a year or twain
I will not thwart thee if thou lov'st again,
Nor eye thee sourly when thou growest cold ;
—Or art thou not the man that men call bold,
And fear'st thou ? Then what better time than this
For we twain to begin our life of bliss ?
Thy keel awaits thee, and to thee alone,
Not to the wretched dastard on the throne,
Thy men will hearken—Nay, thou shalt not speak,
My feeble reed of hope thou shalt not break !—
Let me be gone, thou knowest not of love,
Thou semblance of a man that nought can move !

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

O wise, wise man, I give thee good farewell :
Gather fresh wisdom, thinking of my hell."

She sprang up to her feet and turned away
Trembling, and no word to her could he say
For grief and pity ; and the Queen did go
A little way with doubtful steps and slow,
Then turned about, and once again did stand
Before his troubled face, hand laid in hand,
And sobbing now as if her heart would break ;
But when from his grieved soul he fain would speak,
Again from midst her tears she cried, "No, no—
Do I not know what thou wouldst bid me do?
And yet forgive me!—thou art wise and good.
Surely some evil thing has turned my blood,
That even now I wished that thing to slay
That I of all things only till this day
Have loved. Ah, surely thou wilt not be slain!
Come back, and I will tell thee once again
How much I love thee, and will not forget
To say such things as might have moved thee yet,
Could I have told thee now, couldst thou have seen
These lips that love thee as they might have been.
—Farewell, I durst not pray thee for one kiss!"

Nearer she drew to him as she spake this,
Yet, when she ended, turned about again,
And still, as hoping all was not in vain,
Lingered a little while, and then at last,
With raging heart, swiftly therefrom she passed.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But, she clean vanished now, Bellerophon
Went slowly toward the palace, all alone,
And pondering on these things : and shamed he felt,
E'en as a just man who in sleep has dealt
Unjustly ; nor had all her prayers and tears
Moved love in him, but rather stirred his fears,
For ever was he wise among wise men ;
And though he doubted not her longing, when
She turned and spake soft words, he knew that she
So spake midst hope of what things yet might be,
And yet had left another kind of word,
Whereby a friendless man might well be feared ;
Lonely he felt thereat, as one accurst,
With whom all best things still must turn to worst,
And e'en sweet love curdle to bitter hate.
Yet was he one not lightly crushed by fate,
And when at last he had his helmet on,
And heard the folk cry out " Bellerophon,"
As toward the ship he passed, kind the world seemed,
Nor love so far away indeed he deemed
When he some gentle maiden's kind grey eyes
Fixed on his own he did at whiles surprise,
Or when his godlike eyes, on some maid turned
More fair than most, set fire to thoughts that burned
On breast and brow of her. So forth he passed,
And reached the border of the sea at last,
And there took ship, and hence is gone a space.

But for the Queen, when she had left that place,
About the pleasance paths did she go still,
So 'wilderred in her mind because her will

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Might not be done, that at the first she knew
No more what place she might be passing through
Than one who walks in sleep. Yet hope and shame,
Twain help, at last unto her spirit came;
Yea, her bright gown, soiled with the autumn grass,
Told her the tale of what had come to pass,
And to her heart came hatred of the spot
Where she had kneeled to one who loved her not,
And even therewith his image did she see
As he had been; then cried she furiously:

“Ah, fool! ah, traitor! must I love thee then,
When in the world there are so many men
My smile would drive to madness?—for I know
What things they are that men desire so,
And which of all these bear I not with me?
Hast thou not heart and eyes to feel and see?
Then shalt thou die, then shalt thou die, at least,
Nor sit without me at life’s glorious feast,
While I fall ever unto worse and worse—
Ah me! I rave!—what folly now to curse
That which I love, because its loveliness
Alone has brought me unto this distress!
I know not right nor wrong, but yet through all
Know that the Gods a just man him would call;
Nay, and I knew it, when I saw him first,
And in my heart sprang up that glorious thirst—
And should he, not being base, yield suddenly,
And as the basest man, not loving me,
Take all I gave him, and cast all his life
Into a tangled and dishonoured strife?
Nay, it could never be—but now, indeed,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Somewhat with pity of me his heart may bleed,
Since he is good ; and he shall think of me,
And day by day and night by night shall see
The image of that woman on her knees,
Whom men here liken to the goddesses.
And certainly shall he come back again :
Nor shall my next speech to him be so vain."

She smiled, and toward the house made swiftly on
In triumph, even as though the game were won :
For, now his face was gone, she, blind with love,
Deemed but his honour she had got to move
From its high place, before his heart should fall
A prey unto her ; e'en as when the wall
By many a stroke of stones is battered down,
And all may work their will upon the town.

NOW of Bellerophon must it be said
That, what by wisdom, what by hardihead,
His task was done, and great praise gained thereby ;
So he at last, midst shouts and minstrelsy,
In the first days of spring, passed up once more
Unto the palace from the thronging shore.
Him Proetus met half-way, and, in the face
Of all the people, in a straight embrace
Held him awhile, and called him his dear son,
Praising the Gods for all that he had done ;
Then hand in hand did they go up the street,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

And on their heads folk cast the spring-flowers sweet,
And bands of maids met them with joyous song
And gracious pageants as they went along :
And all this for the brave Corinthian's sake—
Such joy did his return in all hearts make.

But though the man, once from his home driven forth,
Was so much loved and held of so much worth,
And though he throve thereby, and seemed to be
Scarcely a man but some divinity
To people's eyes, yet in his soul no less
There lingered still a little heaviness,
And therefrom hardly could he cast away
The memory of that sunny autumn day
And of the fear it brought ; and one more fear
He had besides, and as they drew anear
The palace, therewith somewhat faltering,
He needs must turn a while, and of the King
Ask how the Lycian fared : the King laughed low,
And said :

“Nay, surely she is well enow,
As her wont is to be, for, sooth to say,
She for herself is ever wont to pray,
And heedeth nothing other grief and wrong :
And be thou sure, my son, that such live long
And lead sweet lives ; but those who ever think
How he and she may fare, and still must shrink
From sweeping any foe from out the way,
These—living other people's lives, I say,
Besides their own, and most of them forlorn—
May hap to find their lives of comfort shorn

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And short enow—let pass, for as to me,
I weep for others' troubles certainly,
But for mine own would weep a little more,
And so I jog on somehow to the shore
Whence I shall not return—Thou laughest—well,
I deem I was not made for heaven or hell,
But simply for the earth; but thou, O son,
I deem of heaven, and all hearts hast thou won—
Yea, and this morn the Queen is merrier,
Because she knoweth that thou art anear.”

The Prince smiled at his words and gladder felt,
Yet somewhat of his old fear by him dwelt
And shamed him midst his honour. But withal,
With shouts and music, entered they the hall,
And there great feast was made; but ere the night
Had 'gun to put an end to men's delight,
A maid came up the hall with hurrying feet,
And there in lowly wise the King did greet,
And bid him know that Sthenobœa had will
The joyance of that high-tide to fulfil,
And Prince Bellerophon to welcome home;
And even as she spoke the Queen was come
Unto the door, and through the hall she passed,
And round about her ever looks she cast,
As though her maidens, howsoever fair
And lovesome unto common eyes they were,
Were fashioned in another wise than she,
They made for time, she for eternity;
So 'twixt the awed and wondering folk she moved,
Hapless and proud, glorious and unbeloved,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

And hating all folk but her love alone :
And he a shadow seemed, one moment shown
Unto her longing eyes, then snatched away
Ere yet her heart could win one glorious day.
Cruel and happy was she deemed of men—
Cruel she was, but though tormented then
By love, still happier than she ere had been.

Now when she saw the Prince, with such-like mien
She greeted him but as a Queen might greet
Her husband's friend fresh from a glorious feat ;
Frank-seeming were her words, and in her face
No sign of all that storm the Prince could trace
That had swept over her—and yet therefore
Amidst his joy he did but fear her more.

So time slipped by, and still was she the same,
Till he 'gan deem she had forgot the shame
Of having shameful gifts cast back to her,
That scorned love was a burden light to bear.
Yea, and the moody ways that once she had
Seemed changing into life all frank and glad ;
She saw him oft now, and alone at whiles ;
But still, despite her kind words and her smiles,
No word of love fell from her any more.

But when the lush green spring was now passed o'er,
And the green lily-buds were growing white,
A feast they held for pastime and delight
Within the odorous pleasance on a tide,
And down the hours the feast in joy did glide.
Venus they worshipped there, her image shone
Above the folk from thoughts of hard life won ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

About her went the girls in ordered bands,
And scattered flowers from out their flowery hands,
And with their eager voices, sweet but shrill,
Betwixt the o'erladen trees the air did fill ;
Or, careless what their dainty limbs might meet,
Ungirded and unshod, with hurrying feet,
Mocked cold Diana's race betwixt the trees,
Where the long grass and sorrel kissed their knees,
About the borders of the neighbouring field ;
Or in the garden were content to yield
Unto the sun, and by the fountain-side,
Panting, love's growing languor would abide.

Surely the Goddess in the warm wind breathed,
Surely her fingers wrought the flowers that wreathed
The painted trellises—some added grace
Her spirit gave to every limb and face,
Some added scent to raiment long laid hid
Beneath the stained chest's carven cypress lid ;
Fairer the girdle round the warm side clung,
Fairer the dainty folds beneath it hung,
Fairer the gold upon the bosom lay
Than was their wont ere that bewildering day,
When fear and shame, twin rulers of the earth,
Sat hoodwinked in the maze of short-lived mirth.

Songs cleft the air, and little words therein
Were clean changed now, and told of honeyed sin,
And passionate words seemed fire, and words, that had
Grave meaning once, were changed, and only bade
The listeners' hearts to thoughts they could not name.
Shame changed to strong desire, desire seemed shame
And trembled ; and such words the lover heard

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

As in the middle of the night afear'd
He once was wont alone to whisper low
Unto himself, for fear the day should know
What his love really was ; the longing eyes
That unabashed were wont to make arise
The blush of shame to bosom and grave brow,
Beholding all their fill, were downcast now ;
The eager heart shrank back, the cold was moved,
Woody was the wooer, the lover was beloved.

But yet indeed from wise Bellerophon
Right little by Queen Venus' wiles was won :
Joyous he was, but nowise would forget
That long and changing might his life be yet,
Nor deemed he had to do with such things now,
So let all pass, e'en as a painted show.
But the Queen hoped belike, and many a prayer
That morn had made to Venus' image fair ;
And as the day wore, hushed she grew at whiles
And pale ; and sick and scornful were her smiles,
Nor knew her heart what words her lips might say.

So through its changing hours went by the day,
And when at last they sang the sun a-down,
And, singing, watched the moon rise, and the town
Was babbling through the clear eve, saddened now,
And faint and weary went, with footsteps slow,
The lover and beloved, to e'en such rest
As they might win ; and soon the daisies, pressed
By oft-kissed dainty feet and panting side,
Now with the dew were growing satisfied,
And sick blind passion now no more might spoil

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The place made beautiful by patient toil
Of many a man. And now Bellerophon
Slept light and sweetly as the night wore on,
Nor dreamed about the morrow; but the Queen
Rose from her bed, and, like a sin unseen,
Stole from the house, and, barefoot as she was,
Through the dark belt of whispering trees did pass
That girt the fair feast's pleasant place around :
And when she came unto that spot of ground
Whereas she deemed Bellerophon had lain,
Then low adown she lay, and as for pain
She moaned, and on the dew she laid her cheek,
Then raised her head and cried :

“Now may I speak,

Now may I speak, since none can hear me now
But thou, O Love, thou of the bitter bow.
Didst thou not see, O Cithæra's son,
Thine image, that men call Bellerophon?
Thine image, with the heart of stone, the eyes
Of fire, those forgers of all miseries?
And shall I bear thy burden all alone,
In silent places making my low moan?
Nay, but once more I try it—help thou me,
Or on the earth a strange deed shalt thou see.
Lo, now! thou knowest what my will has been :
Day after day his fair face have I seen
And made no sign—thus had I won him soon.
But thou, the dreadful sun, the cruel moon,
The scents, the flowers, the half-veiled nakedness
Of wanton girls, my heart did so oppress,
That now the chain is broken—Didst thou see

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

How when he turned his cruel face on me
He laughed?—he laughed, nor would behold my heart :
He laughed, to think at last he had a part
In joyous life without me : here, e'en here,
He drank, rejoicing much, still drawing near,
As the fool thought, to riches and renown.
And such an one wilt thou not cast adown
When thou rememberest how he came to me
With wan worn cheek?—Ah, sweet he was to see ;
I loved him then—how can I love him now,
So changed, so changed ?

“ But thou—what doest thou ?
Hast thou forgotten how thy temples stand,
Made rich with gifts, in many a luckless land ?
Hast thou forgotten what strange rites are done
To gain thy goodwill underneath the sun?—
Thou art asleep, then ! Wake !—the world will end
Because thou sleepest—e'en now doth it wend
Unto the sickening end of all delights ;
Black, black the days are, dull grey are the nights,
No more the night hides shame, no more the day
Unto the rose-strewn chamber lights the way ;
And folk begin to curse thee, ‘ *Love is gone,
Grey shall the earth be, filled with rocks alone,
Because the generations shall die out ;
Grey shall the earth be, lonely, wrapped about
With cloudy memories of the moans of men.*’
Thus, thus they curse. Shall I not curse thee then,
Thou who tormentest me and leav'st me lone,
Nor thinkest once of all that thou hast done?—
Spare me ! What cruel God taught men to speak,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

To cast forth words that for all good are weak
And strong for all undoing?—thou know'st this,
O lovely one! take not all hope of bliss
Away from me, because my eager prayer
Grows like unto a curse. O great and fair,
Hearken a little, for to-morn must I
Speak once again of love to him, or die ;
Hast thou no dream to send him, such as thou
Hast shown to me so many a time or now ?
Wilt thou not make him weep without a cause,
As I have done, as sleep her dark veil draws
From off his head ? or his awaking meet
With lovely images, so soft and sweet
That they, forgotten quite, yet leave behind
Great yearning for bright eyes and touches kind.
Alas, alas ! wilt thou not change mine eyes,
Or else blind his, the cold, the over-wise ?
O Love, he knows my heart, and what it is—
No fool he is to cast away his bliss
On such as me : nay, rather he will take
Some grey-eyed girl to love him for his sake,
Not for her own—he knows me, and therefore
I, grovelling here where he has lain, the more
Must burn for him—he knows me ; and thou, too,
Better than I, knowest what I shall do.
O Love, thou knowest all, yet since I live
A little joyance hope to me doth give ;
Wilt thou not grant me now some sign, O Love ;
Wilt thou not redden this dark sky, or move
Those stark hard walls, or make the spotted thrush
Cry as in morn through this dark scented hush ? ”

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

She ceased, and leaned back, kneeling, and all spent
And panting, with her trembling fingers rent
The linen from her breast, and, with shut eyes,
Waited awhile as for some great surprise,
But yet heard nothing stranger or more loud
Than the leaves' rustle; a long bank of cloud
Lay in the south, low down, and scarcely seen
'Gainst the grey sky, and when at last the Queen
Opened her eyes, she started eagerly,
Although the strangest thing her eyes could see
Was but the summer lightning playing there;
Then she put back her over-hanging hair,
And in a hard and grating voice she said:

“O Sthenobœa, art thou then afraid
Of a god's presence?—did a god e'er come
To help a good and just man when his home
Was turned to hell? I was but praying here
Unto myself, who to myself am dear
Alone of all things, mine own self to aid.
And therewithal I needs must grow afraid
E'en of myself—O wretch, unholpen still,
To-morrow early thou shalt surely fill
The measure of thy woe—and then—and then—
Alas for me! What cruellest man of men
Had made me this, and left me even thus?”

Unto the sky wild eyes and piteous
She turned, and gat unto her feet once more,
And, led by use, came back unto the door
Whence she went out, and with no stealthy tread,
Careless of all things, gat her to her bed,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And there at last, in grief and care's despite,
Slept till the world had long forgotten night.

Bellerophon arose the morrow morn
Unlike the man that once had been forlorn ;
Bright-eyed and merry was he, and such fear
As yet clung round him did but make joy dear,
And more in hope he was, and knew not why,
Than any day that yet had passed him by.
Now ere the freshness of the morn had died,
Restless with happiness, he thought to ride
Unto a ship, that in a little bay
Anigh to Phlius, bound for outlands, lay,
Unto whose Phrygian master had the King
Given commands to buy him many a thing,
And soon he sailed, since fair was grown the wind.

But as Bellerophon in such a mind
Passed slow along the marble cloister-wall,
He heard a voice his name behind him call,
And turning, saw the Thracian maiden fair,
Leucippe, coming swiftly toward him there,
Who when she reached him stayed, and drawing breath
As one who rests, said, "Sir, my mistress saith
That she awhile is fain to speak with thee
Before thou goest down unto the sea ;
And in her bower for thee doth she abide."
He gave her some light word, and side by side
The twain passed toward the bower, he all the while
Noting the Thracian with a well-pleased smile ;
For his fear slept, or he felt strong enow
Things good and ill unto his will to bow.

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Yet was the gentle Thracian pale that day,
And still she seemed as she some word would say
Unto him, that her lips durst not to frame ;
And when unto the Queen's bower-door they came,
And he passed there, and it was shut on him,
She lingered still, and through her body slim
A tremor ran, her pale face waxed all red,
And her lips moved as though some word they said
She durst not utter loud ; then she looked down
Upon her bare feet and her slave's wool gown,
And to her daily task straight took her way.

Now on his throne King Prætus judged that day,
And heard things dull, things strange, but when at last
The summer noon now by an hour had passed,
He went to meat, and thought to see thereat
Bellerophon's frank face, who ever sat
At his right hand ; but empty was his place.
And when the King, who fain had seen his face,
Asked whither he was gone, a certain man
Said : " King, I saw the brave Corinthian,
Two hours ago, pass through the outer door,
And in his face there seemed a trouble sore,
So that I needs must ask him what was wrong ;
But staring at me as he went along,
Silent he passed, as if he heard me not ;
Afoot he was, nor weapon had he got."

The King's face clouded, but the meal being done,
In his fair chariot did he get him gone
Unto the haven, where the Phrygian ship
Was waiting his last word her ropes to slip.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Restless he was, and wished that night were come.
But ere he left the fair porch of his home,
Unto the Queen a messenger he sent,
And bade her know whereunto now he went,
And prayed her go with him ; but presently
Back came the messenger, and said that she
Was ill at ease and in her bower would bide,
For scarcely she upon that day might ride.

So at that word of hers the Argive King
Went on his way, but somewhat muttering,
For heavy thoughts were gathering round his heart ;
But when he came where, ready to depart,
The ship lay, with the bright-eyed master there
Some talk he had, who said the wind was fair
And all things ready ; then the King said, " Friend,
To-morrow's noon I deem will make an end
Of this thy lingering ; I will send to thee
A messenger to tell the certainty
Of my last wishes, who shall bring thee gold
And this same ring that now thou dost behold
Upon my finger, for a token sure—
Farewell, and may thy good days long endure."

He turned, but backward sent his eyes awhile,
Sighing, though on his lips there was a smile ;
The half-raised sail that clung unto the mast,
The tinkling ripple 'gainst the black side cast,
The thin blue smoke that from the poop arose,
The northland dog that midst of ropes did doze,
The barefoot shipmen's eyes upon him bent,
Curious and half-defiant, as they went

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

About their work—all these things raised in him
Desire for roving—stirred up thoughts that, dim
At this time, clear at that, still oft he had,
That there his life was not so overglad ;
And as toward Argos now he rode along
By the grey sea, the shipmen's broken song
Smote on his ear and with the low surf's fall
Mingled, and seemed to him perchance to call
To freedom and a life not lived in vain.

But even so his palace did he gain,
And the dull listless day slipped into night,
And smothering troublous thoughts e'en as he might
Did he betake himself to bed, and there
Lay half-asleep beneath the tester fair,
Waiting until the low-voiced flutes gave sign
That thither drew the Lycian's feet divine—
For so the wont was, that she still was led
Unto her chamber as a bride new-wed.

Of that sweet sound nought heard the King at all
But straightway into a short sleep did fall,
Then woke as one who knoweth certainly
That all the hours he now shall hear pass by,
Nor sleep until the sun is up again.
So, waking, did he hear a cry of pain
Within the chamber, and thereat adrad
He turned him round, and saw the Queen, so clad
That on her was her raiment richly wrought,
Yet in such case as though hard fate had brought
Some bane of kings into the royal place,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And with that far-removed and dainty grace
The rough hands of some outland foe had dealt ;
For dragged athwart her was the jewelled belt,
Rent and disordered the Phœnician gown,
The linen from her shoulders dragged adown,
Her arms and glorious bosom made half-bare,
And furthermore such shameful signs were there,
As though not long past hands had there been laid
Heavier than touches of the tiring-maid.

So swiftly through the place from end to end
She paced, but yet stopped now and then to send
Low bitter moans forth on the scented air ;
And through the King's heart shot a bitter fear,
Nor could he move—he had believed her cold,
And wise to draw herself from pleasure's hold
When it began to sting the heart—but now
What shameful thing would these last minutes show ?

Now as she went a look askance she cast
Upon the King, and turning at the last,
With strange eyes drew anigh the royal bed,
And, with clasped hands, before him stood, and said :
“Thou wakest, then ? thou wonderest at this sight ?
I have a tale to tell to thee this night
I cannot utter, unless words are taught
Unto my lips to draw forth all my thought—
Thou wonderest at my words ? Then ask, then ask !
The sooner will be done my heavy task.”

Upright in bed the King sat, pale with doubt
And gathering fear ; his right hand he stretched out

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

To take the Queen's hand, but aback she drew,
Shuddering; and half he deemed the truth he knew,
As o'er her pale face and her bosom came
Beneath his gaze a flush as if of shame :
"Wilt thou not speak, and make an end?" she cried.

Then he spake slowly, "Why dost thou abide
Without my bed to-night? why dost thou groan,
Whom I ere now no love-sick girl have known?"

She covered up her face at that last word ;
The thick folds of her linen gown were stirred
As her limbs writhed beneath them—nought she said,
As though the word was not remembered
She had to say ; and, loth the worst to hear,
The King awhile was tongue-tied by his fear.

At last the words came : "Thou bad'st ask of thee
Why thou to-night my playmate wouldst not be—
What hast thou done? Speak quickly of the thing!"

She drew her hands away, and cried, "O King,
Art thou awake yet, that this shameful guise
Seems nothing strange unto thy drowsy eyes,
Wilt thou not ask why this and this is torn?
Why this is bruised? Lo, since the long-passed morn
Thus have I sat, that thou e'en this might see,
And ask what madness there has been in me.
Thus have I sat, and cursed the God who made
The day so long, the night so long delayed.

"Ask! thou art happy that the Lycian sod

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Unwearied oft my virgin feet have trod
From dawn to dusk ; that in the Lycian wood
Before wild things untrembling I have stood ;
That this right arm so oft the javelin threw—
These fingers rather the grey bowstring knew
Than the gold needle : even so, indeed,
Of more than woman's strength had I had need
If with a real man I had striven to-day ;
But he who would have shamed thee went his way
Like a scourged woman—thou wilt spare him, then—
Lay down thy sword !—that is for manly men.”

For while she spake, and in her eyes did burn
The fires of hate, the King's face had waxed stern,
And ere her bitter speech was fully o'er,
He had arisen, and from off the floor
Had gat his proven sword into his hand,
And eager by the trembling Queen did stand,
And cried, “Nay, hold ! for surely I know well
What tale it is thy lips to-night would tell ;
Therefore my sword befits me, the tried friend
That many a troublous thing has brought to end.
Yet fear not, for another friend have I
To help me deal with this new villainy,
Even the godlike man Bellerophon ;
So with one word thy heavy task is done.
—O Sthenobœa, speak the name of him
Who wrought this deed, then let that name wax dim
Within thy mind till it is dead and past ;
For, certes, yesterday he saw the last
Of setting suns his doomed eyes shall behold.”

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Pale as a corpse she waxed, and stony cold
Amidst these words ; silent awhile she was
After the last word from the King did pass,
But in a low voice at the last she said :

“ Yea, for this deed of his must he be dead ?
And must he be at peace, because he strove
To take from me honour, and peace, and love ?
Must a great King do thus ? or hast thou not
Some lightless place in mighty Argos got
Where nought can hap to break the memory
Of what he hoped in other days might be ;
For great he hath been, and of noble birth
As any man who dwelleth on the earth.
—Thou hast forgotten that the dead shall rest,
Whate’er they wrought on earth of worst or best.”

But the King gazed upon her gloomily,
And said, “ Nay, nay ;—the man shall surely die—
His hope die with him, is it not enow ?
But no such mind I bear in me as thou,
Who speakest not as a great Queen should speak,
But rather as a girl made mad and weak
By hope delayed and love cast back again,
Who knoweth not her words are words and vain.
Content thee, thou art loved and honoured still—
Speak forth the name of him who wrought the ill,
For I am fain to meet Bellerophon,
So that we twain may do what must be done.”

He spake, but mid the tumult of her mind
She heard him not, and deaf she was and blind

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

To all without, nor knew she if her feet
The marble cold or red-hot iron did meet.
She moved not and she felt not, but a sound
Came from her lips, and smote the air around
With slow hard words :

“ Ah ! thou hast named him then
Twice in this hour alone of earthly men ;—
That same Bellerophon, that all folk love,
In manly wise this morn against me strove ! ”

Ah, how the world was changed, as she went by
The King, bewildered with new misery—
Ah, and how little time it was ago
When all that deed of hers was not yet done,
When yet she might have died for him, and made
A little love her lonely tomb to shade
Spring up within his heart—when hope there was
Of many a thing that yet might come to pass—
And now, and now—those spoken words must be
A part of her, an unwrought misery
That would not let her rest till all was o’er,—
Nay, nay, no rest upon the shadowy shore.

Slowly she left the chamber, none the less
With measured steps her feet the floor did press
As a Queen’s should, nor fainted she at all,
But straight unto the door ’twixt wall and wall
She went, and still perchance had forced a smile
Had she met any one ; and all the while
Set in such torment as men cannot name,
If she did think, wondered that still the same

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Were all things round her as they had been erst—
That the house fell not—that the feet accurst
To carry her yet left no sign in blood
Of where the wretchedest on earth had stood—
That round about her still her raiment clung—
That no great sudden pain her body stung,
No inward flame her false white limbs would burn
Or into horror all her beauty turn—
That still the gentle sounds of night were there
As she had known them: the light summer air
Within the thick-leaved trees, as she passed by
Some open window, and the nightbird's cry
From far; the gnat's thin pipe about her head,
The wheeling moth delaying to be dead
Within the taper's flame—yea, certainly
Shall things about her as they have been be,
And even that a torment now has grown.

Yet must she reap the grain that she has sown;
No thought of turning back was in her heart,
No more in those past days can she have part:
Nay, when her glimmering bower she came unto,
She muttered through the dusk, "As I would do
So have I done—so would I do again."

Lo, thus in unimaginable pain
Leave we her now, and to the King turn back,
Who stood there overwhelmed by sudden lack
Of what he leaned on—with his life left bare
Of a great pleasure that was growing there.
A storm of rage swept through his heart, to think

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

That he of such a cup as this must drink ;
For if he doubted aught, this was his doubt,
That all the tale was not told fully out—
That for Bellerophon the Queen's great scorn
And loathing was a thing but newly born—
That bitter hate was but a lover's hate,
Which even yet beneath the hand of fate
Might turn to hottest love. He groaned thereat,
And staggering back, upon the bed he sat ;
His bright sword from his hand had fallen down
When that last dreadful word at him was thrown,
And now, with head sunk 'twixt his hands, he sought
Some outlet from the weary girth of thought
That hemmed him in.

“ And must I slay him then,
Him whom I loved above all earthly men ?
Behold, if now I slept here, and next morn,
Ere the day's memory should be fully born
From out of sleep, men came and said to me,
'Sire, the Corinthian draweth nigh to thee,'
My first thought would be joy that he had come.
And yet I am a King, nor shall my home
Become a brothel before all men's eyes.
He who drinks deadly poison surely dies,
And he hath drunk, and must abide the end.
Yet hath the image of him been my friend—
What shall I do ? Not lightly can I bear
The voice of men about these things to hear ;
'He trusted him, he thought himself right wise
To look into men's souls through lips and eyes—
—Behold the end !—' Yea, and most certainly

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

I will not bear once more his face to see ;
Nor in the land where he was purified
Shall grass or marble by his blood be dyed,
Since he must go—green grew a bough of spring
Amidst the barren death of many a thing ;
Not barren it, since poison fruits it bore—
Behold now, I, who loved my life of yore,
Begin to weary that I e'er was born ;
But let it pass—rather let good men mourn ;
Great men, the earth's salt, wear their lives away
In weeping for the ne'er-returning day :
For surely all is good enough for me.

“And yet alas ! what truth there seemed in thee—
—What can I do ? Might he not die in war ?—
Nay, but at peace through him my borders are.
He shall not die here—the deep sea were good
To hide the story of his untamed blood—
Or, further—O thou fool, that so must make
My life so dull, e'en for a woman's sake !
There in that land, then, shall thy bones have rest
Beneath the sod her worshipped feet have pressed.
In Lycia shalt thou die ; her father's hand
Shall draw the sword, or his lips give command
To make an end of thee—So shall it be,
And that swift Phrygian ready now for sea
Shall bear thee hence—Would I had known thee
not !

A new pain hast thou been—a heavy lot
My life in early morn to me shall seem,
When I have dreamed that all was but a dream,
And waked to truth again and lonely life.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“Let be; now must I forge the hidden knife
Against thee, and I would the thing were done.
Thou may’st not die so; thou art such an one
As the gods love, whatever thou mayst do,
Perchance they pay small heed to false or true
In such as we are. But the lamps burn low,
The night wears, grey the eastern sky doth grow;
I must forget thee; fellow, fare thee well,
Who might have turned my feet from lonely hell

So saying, slowly, as a man who needs
Must do a deed that woe and evil breeds,
He rose, and took his writing tools to him,
And ere the day had made the tapers dim,
Two letters with his own hand had he made,
And open was the first one, and it said
These words:

*Unto the wise Bellerophon—
To Lycia the Gods call thee, O my son;
So when thou hast this letter in thine hand,
Abide no longer in the Argive land
Than if thou fleddest some avenging man,
But make good speed to that swift Phrygian
Who for the southlands saileth this same day.
Take thou this gold for furtherance and stay,
And this for his reward who rules the keel,
And for a token show him this my seal.
This casket to the Lycian king bear forth,
That hath in it a thing of greatest worth;
And let no hand be laid on it but thine*

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

*Till in Jobates' hands its gold doth shine.
Then bid him mind how that he had of me
When last I saw his face the fellow key
To that which in mine hands doth open it—*

Awhile the King had stayed when this was writ,
And on the gathering greyness of the morn
Long fixed his eyes, unseeing and forlorn,
Then o'er the paper moved his hand again.

*Mayst thou do well among these outland men.
Perchance my face thou never more shalt see,
Perchance but little more remains to thee
Of thy loved life—thou wert not one to cry
Curses on all because life passeth by.
If woe befalls thee there, think none the less
That I erewhile have wrought thee happiness ;
Farewell ! and ask thou not to see me first :
Life worsens here, and ere it reach the worst,
Unto the fove that may be would I speak
To help my people, wandering blind and weak.*

Another letter by the King's side lay,
But closed and sealed ; so in the twilight grey
Now did he rise, and summoned presently
A slumbering chamberlain that was thereby,
And bade him toward the treasury lead, and take
Two leathern bags for that same errand's sake ;
So forth the twain went to that golden place ;
But when they were therein, a mournful face

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Still the King seemed to see, e'en as it was
When he from room to room with him did pass
Who now had wronged him ; then the gold waxed
dim,

For bitter pain his vexed heart wrought for him,
And filled with unused tears his hard wise eyes.
But choking back the thronging memories,
He laid the letter that he erst did hold
Within a casket wrought of steel and gold,
Which straight he locked ; then bade his fellow fill
The bags he bore from a great golden hill,
Then to his room, made cold with morn, returned ;
And since for change and some swift deed he yearned,
He bade his chamberlain bring hunter's weed,
And saddle him straightway his fleetest steed :
" And see," said he, " before the Prince arise
Ye show this letter to his waking eyes,
And give into his hands these things ye see ;
And make good speed, the time grows short for me."

So spake he, and there grew on him a thought
That thither might Bellerophon be brought
Ere he could get him gone ; and therewithal
At last the low sun topped the garden-wall,
And o'er the dewy turf long shadows threw ;
Then, being new clad, the porch he hurried to,
And paced betwixt its pillars feverishly,
Until he heard the horse-boys' cheery cry
And the sharp clatter of the well-shod feet ;
Then he ran out, the joyous steed to meet,
And mounted, and rode forth, he scarce knew where,

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Until the town was passed, and 'twixt the fair
Green corn-fields of the June-tide he drew rein,
To ponder on his life, so spoiled and vain.

But when Bellerophon awoke that morn,
Weary he felt, as though he long had borne
Some heavy load, and his perplexéd heart
Must chide the life wherein he had a part.
But ere he gat him down to meet the day
With its new troubles, 'thwart his weary way
Was come that chamberlain, who bade him read,
And say what other thing he yet might need.

He read, and knit his anxious brows in thought,
For in his mind great doubt that letter brought
If yet he were in friendship with the King ;
And therewith came a dark imagining
Of unseen dangers, and great anger grew
Within his soul, as if the worst were true
Of all he thought might be ; and in his mind
It was, that going, he might leave behind
A bitter word to pay for broken troth :
And still the King's man saw that he was wroth,
And watched him curiously, till he had read
The letter thrice, but nought to him he said.

At last he spake, "Sir, even as the King
Now bids me, will I make no tarrying ;
And as I came to Argos, even so,
Unfriended, bearing nothing, will I go ;
And few farewells are best to-day, I deem,
For like a banished man I would not seem

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Among these folk that love me : get we gone,
And tell the King his full will shall be done."

So forth they ride, and ever as the way
Lengthened behind them, and the summer day
Grew hotter on the lovely teeming earth,
The fresh soft air and sounds and sights of mirth
Wrought on Bellerophon, until it seemed
That things might not be e'en as he had deemed
At first. "What thoughts are mine ; have I not had
Gifts from his hands—hath he not made me glad
When I was sorry ? Therefore will I take
What chance there lies herein for honour's sake.
Nay, more, and may not friendship lie herein ?—
May he not drive me forth from shame and sin
And evil fate ? Well, howsoe'er it is,
But little evil do I see in this :
Yea, I may see his face again once more,
And crowned with honour come back to this shore,
For now I fear nought—if he thinks to see
Some evil thing that nowise is in me,
Another day the truth of all will show.
Let pass, again from out the place I go
Wherein the sport of fortune I have tried ;
If it has failed me, yet the world is wide
And I am young. Now go I forth alone
To do what in my life must needs be done,
And in my own hands lies my fate, I think,
And I shall mix the cup that I must drink :
So be it ; thus the world is merrier,
And I shall be a better man than here."

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Amid these thoughts, unto the ship he came
And higher yet sprang up the new-stirred flame
Of great desires when first he saw the sea
Leap up against her black sides lovingly,
And heard the sails flap, and the voice of folk,
Who at the sight of him in shouts outbroke,
Since they withal were eager to be gone.
And now were all things done that should be done ;
The money rendered up, the King's seal shown,
Unto the master all his will made known,
And on the deck stood the Corinthian.
As up the mast clattering the great rings ran,
And back the hawser to the ship was cast,
The helmsman took the tiller, and at last
The head swung round, trimly the great sail drew,
The broad bows pierced the land of fishes through,
Unheard the red wine fell from out the cup
Into the noisy sea ; and then rose up
The cloud of incense-smoke a little way,
But driven from the prow, with the white spray
It mingled, and a little dimmed the crowd
Of white-head waves ; then rose the sea-song loud,
While on the stern still stood Bellerophon,
Bidding farewell to what of life was gone,
Pensive, but smiling somewhat to behold
The lengthening wake, and field, and hill, and wold,
And white-walled Argos growing small astern,
That he the pleasure of the Gods might learn.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

BUT when the King's man, with a doubtful smile,
Had watched the parting sails a little while,
He turned about, revolving many things
Within his mind, of the weak hearts of kings,
Because the Prince's glory seemed grown dim,
And nowise grand this parting seemed to him;
"For day-long leave-taking there should have been,"
He grumbled, "and fair tables well beseen
Should have been spread the gilded ship anigh,
And many a perfect beast been slain thereby
Unto the Gods—Had this Bellerophon
Too great fame for the King of Argos won?
I will be lowly, for no little bliss
I have in Argos, a good place it is—
Or else what thing has happed?"

Howe'er it was,
Slowly again to Argos did he pass,
And here and there he spake upon that day
Of how Bellerophon had gone away,
Perchance as one who would no more return;
And sore hearts were there, who thereat must yearn
To see the face that let a weak hope live;
And folk still doomed with many things to strive,
Who found him helpful—few indeed were there
Who did not pray that well he still might fare
Whereso he was, and few forgot him quite
For many a day and many a changing night.

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

But Sthenobœa, when she knew that morn
That she was not alone of love forlorn,
But of the thing too that fed love in her,
Yet coldly at the first her lot did bear
In outward seeming : in no other wise
She sat among her maids than when his eyes
Had first met hers. "No babble shall there be
In this fool's land concerning him and me.
Gone is he,—let him die and be forgot :
Cold is my heart that yesterday was hot,
Quenched is the fervent flame of yesterday ;
Past is the time when I had cast away,
If he had bidden me, name, and fame, and all :
Now in this dull world e'en let things befall
As they are fated ; I am stirred no more
By any hap—hope, hate, and love are o'er."

So spake she in the morn, when, still a Queen,
She sat among her folk as she had been,
Dreaded, unloved ; yet as the day wore on
She felt as though it never would be done.
And now she took to wandering restlessly,
And set her face to go unto the sea,
But soon turned back, and through the palace ranged,
And thought she thought not of him, and yet changed
Her face began to grow ; and if she spoke,
As one untroubled, aught unto her folk,
Her speech grew wild and broken ere its end ;
And as about the place she still did wend,
More than its wonted chill her presence threw
On those who of her coming footsteps knew—

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Yea, as she passed by some, she even thought
A look like pity to their eyes was brought,
And then, amidst her craving agony,
Must she grow red with wrath that such could be.

Now came the night, and she must cast aside
All semblance of her coldness and her pride,
And find the weary night was longer yet
Than was the day, and harder to forget
The thoughts that came therewith. How can I tell
In any words the torment of that hell
That she for her own soul had fashioned so,
That from it never any path did go
To lands of rest, no window was therein,
Through which there shone a hope of happier sin ;
But close the fiery walls about her glared,
And on one dreadful picture still she stared,
Intent on that desire, that dreadful love,
The dulness of her savage heart that clove
With wasting fire, a bane to her, and all
Who in the net of her vain life might fall.

The next day wore, and thereto followed night,
And changed through dark and dusk and dawn to light ;
And when at last high-risen was the sun,
The women came to do what should be done
In the Queen's chamber : water for the bath
They brought, and dainties such as Venus hath ;
Gold combs, embroidered cloths, pearl-threaded strings,
Such unguents as the hidden river brings
Through strange-wrought caverns down into a sea

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

Where seldom any keel of man may be ;
Fine Indian webs, the work of many a year,
And incense that the bleeding tree doth bear
Lone in the desert ;—yea, and fear withal
Of what new thing upon that day might fall
From her they served, for on the day now dead
Wild words, strange threatenings had her writhed lips
said.

But when within the chamber door they were,
A new hope grew within them, a new fear,
For empty 'neath the golden canopy
The bed lay, and when one maid drew anigh,
She saw that all untouched the linen was
As for that night ; so when it came to pass
That in no chamber of that house of gold
Might any one the Lycian's face behold,
Nor any sign of her, then therewithal
To others of the household did they call,
And asked if they had tidings of the Queen ;
And when they found that she had not been seen
Since at the end of day to bed she passed,
Within their troubled minds the thing they cast,
And thus remembered that at whiles of late
She had been wont the rising sun to wait
Within the close below her bower ; so then
They called together others, maids and men,
And passed with troubled eyes adown the stair ;
And coming to the postern-door that there
Led out into the pleasance, that they found
Still open, and thereby upon the ground,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And on a jagged bough of creeping vine,
Gold threads they saw, and silken broidery fine,
That well they knew torn from the Lycian's gown;
Therewith by hasty feet were trodden down
The beds of summer flowers that lay between
The outer wicket of that garden green
And the bower-door—feet that had heeded nought
By what wild ways they to their end were brought;
Then by the gate where the faint sweetbriar-rose
Grew thick about the edges of the close,
Had one pushed through their boughs in such a way
That fragments of a dainty thin array
Yet fluttered on the thorns in the light breeze,
Nor might they doubt who once had carried these.

But when the pleasance-gate they had passed through,
At first within the lingering strip of dew
Beneath the wall, footprints they well could see;
But as the shadow failed them presently,
And little could the close-cropped summer grass
Tell them of feet that might have chanced to pass
Thereby before the dawn, their steps they stayed,
And this and that thing there betwixt them weighed
With many words; then splitting up their band,
Some took the way unto the well-tilled land,
Some seaward went, and some must turn their feet
Unto the wood: yet did not any meet
A further sign; and though some turned again
To tell the tale at once, yet all in vain
Did horsemen scour the country far and wide,
And vainly was the sleuth-hounds' mettle tried—

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

—Gone was the Lycian, and in such a guise
That silence seemed the best word for the wise.
But many a babbling tongue in Argos was,
Who for no gold had let such matters pass;
And some there were who, mindful of her face
As down the street she passed in queenly grace,
Said that some god had seen her even as they,
And with no will that longer she should stay
Midst dying men, had taken her to his home—
“And we are left behind,” they said; but some,
Who had been nigher to her, said that she,
Smitten by some benign divinity
Who loved the world and lovely Argos well,
Had fled with changed heart far from man to dwell—
Yea, and might be a goddess even yet.
But other folk, well ready to forget
Her bitter soul, and well content to bear
The changed life that she erst had filled with care,
Smiled, and said yea to better and to worse.
But inly thought that many a heart-felt curse
Her careless ears had heard upon the earth
Had not returned to where it had its birth.

The Gods are kind, and hope to men they give
That they their little span on earth may live,
Nor yet faint utterly; the Gods are kind,
And will not suffer men all things to find
They search for, nor the depth of all to know
They fain would learn: and it was even so
With Sthenobœa; for a fisher old

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

That day a tale unto his carline told,
E'en such as this :

“ When I last night had laid
The boat up 'neath the high cliff, and had made
All things about it trim, and left thee here,
Even as thou knowest, I set out to bear
Those mullets unto Argos. Nought befell
At first whereof is any need to tell,
But when the night had now grown very old,
And, as my wont is, I was waxing bold,
And thinking of the bright returning day,
That drives the sprites of wood and wave away,
As the path leads, I entered the beech-wood
Which, close to where the ancient palace stood,
Clothes the cliff's edge ; I entered warily,
Yet thought no evil thing therein to see.
Scarce lighter than dark night it was therein,
Though swift without the day on night did win.
So I went on, I say, and had no fear,
So nigh to day ; but getting midmost, where
Thinner it grows and lighter, toward the sea,
I stayed my whistling, for it seemed to me
The wind moaned louder than it should have done,
Because of wind without was well-nigh none.
When I stood still it ended, and again,
E'en as I moved, I seemed to hear it plain.
Trembling, I stopped once more, and heard indeed
A sound as though one moaned in bitter need,
Clearer than was the moaning of the surf,
Now muffled by a rising bank of turf

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

On the cliff's edge ; fear-stricken, yet in doubt,
Through the grey glimmer now I peered about,
And turned unto the sea : then my heart sank,
For by the tree the nighest to that bank
A white thing stood, like, as I now could see,
The daughters of us sons of misery,
Though such I deemed her not—and yet had I
No will or power to turn about and fly ;
And now it moaned and moaned, and seemed to writhe
Against the tree its body long and lithe.
Long gazed I, while still colourless and grey,
But swift enow, drew on the dawn of day ;
But as I trembled there, at last I heard
How in a low voice it gave forth this word :

“ ‘ *What say'st thou ?—“ Live on still—I loved thee not
The while I lived ; my bane from thee I got :
And canst thou think that I shall love thee, then,
Where no will is, or power to sons of men ?”*
*I know not, thou mayst hate me, yet I come
That I may look on thee in that new home
My hands built for thee : if the priests speak truth,
What heart thou hast may yet be stirred by ruth,
When thy changed eyes behold the traitorous Queen
Tormented for the vile thing she has been—
If, as the books say, e'en such ways they have
As we on this explored side of the grave.
Yea, thou mayst pity then mine agony,
When no more evil I can do to thee.
Here on the earth I could not weep enow,
Or show thee all my misery here, and thou*

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

*Must ever look upon me as a Queen,
Thy mistress and thy fear. Couldst thou have seen
My weary ways upon this long, long night—
Couldst thou behold the coming day's new sight,
When round this tree the folk come gathering
To see the wife and daughter of a King,
Slain by her own hand, and in such a wise—
O thou I hoped for once, might not thine eyes
Have softened had they seen me shivering here,
Alone, unholpen, sick with my first fear,
Beat down by coming shame, and mocked by these
Gay fluttering rags of dainty braveries
That decked my state ; by gold, and pearl, and gem,
Over my wretched breast, set in the hem
This night has torn, and o'er my bleeding feet ;
Mocked by this glittering girdle, nowise meet
To do the hangman's office ?—Couldst thou see
That even so I needs must think of thee—
Whom I have slain, whose eyes I have made blind,
Whose feet I stayed that me they might not find,
That I might not be helped of any one ?'*

“ The day was dawning when her words were done,
And to her waist I saw her set her hand,
And take the girdle thence, and therewith stand
With arms that moved above her head a space
Within the tree ; and still she had her face
Turned from me, and I stirred not, minding me
Of tales of treacherous women of the sea,
The bane of men ; but now her arms down fell,
And low she spake, yet could I hear her well :

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

*“Thou bitter noose, that thus shalt end my days,
Rather than blame, shalt thou have thanks and praise
From all men: I have loved one man alone,
And unto him the worst deed have I done
Of all the ill deeds I have done on earth.
—I curse men not, although midst mocks and mirth,
They say, “Rejoice, for Sthenobœa is dead.””*

“I started forward as that word she said,
And she beheld me—face to face we met
In the grey light, nor shall I e’er forget
Those dreadful eyes, for such indeed I deem
A goddess high up in the heavens might seem
If she should learn that all was changed, to bring
Death on her head as on an earthly thing.
Alas! I have beheld men die ere now,
But eld or sickness sore their hearts did bow
With feebleness to bear what might betide,
Or else mid hope of name and fame they died,
And the world left them unawares; but she,
Full of hot blood and life yet, I could see
Was red-lipped as an image, and still had
Such smooth, soft cheeks as made beholders glad
In many a feast and solemn sacrifice;
But yet such dreadful hate was in her eyes,
Such loathing of the ways of Gods and men,
Such gathered-up despair, that truly then
I shook so that my hands might hold no more
The staff and half-filled basket that I bore.

“But in a moment slowly she turned round,
And toward the rising swarded space of ground

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Betwixt the beech-trees and the sea she went ;
And I, although I knew well her intent,
Yet could not stir. There on the brink she stood ;
A cool sea-wind now swept into the wood,
And drave her raiment round her ; I could see,
E'en in the dawn, that jewelled broidery
Gleam in the torn folds of the glittering hem ;
And now she raised her arms, I saw on them
Jewels again—Then sightless did I stand,
For such a cry I heard, as though a hand
Of fire upon her wasted heart was laid,
And to and fro, I deem, a space she swayed
Her slender body ; then I moved at last,
And hurried toward the sheer cliff's edge full fast,
But ere I reached the green brink, was she gone ;
And, hanging o'er the rugged edge alone,
With trembling hands, far down did I behold
A white thing meet the dark grey waves and cold ;
For overhanging is that foreland high,
And little sand beneath its feet doth lie
At lowest of the tide, and on that morn
Against the scarped rock was the white surf borne.

“ Ah, long I looked before I turned away.
No friend, indeed, was lost to me that day—
I knew her not but by the people's voice,
And they 'twas like hereat would e'en rejoice ;
Yet o'er my heart a yearning passion swept,
And there where she had stood I lay and wept,
Worn as I am by care and toil and eld.

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

“But when I rose again, then I beheld
The girdle to the rough bough hanging yet,
And this I loosed and in my hand did get,
And lingered for a while ; then went my way,
Nor thought at first if it were night or day,
So much I pondered on the tale so wrought,
What God to nothing such a life had brought.

“But when unto the city gate I came,
I found the thronging people all aflame
With many rumours, and this one they knew
Among all other guesses to be true,
That of the Queen nought knew her wonted place ;
But unto me who still beheld that face
There in the beech-wood, idle and base enow
Seemed all that clamour carried to and fro—
Curses and mocks, and foolish laughter loud,
And gaping wonder of the empty crowd ;
So in great haste I got my errand done,
And sold my wares e’en unto such an one
As first remembered he must eat to-day,
What king or queen soe’er had passed away.
Thus I returned, bringing the belt with me—
Behold it!—And what way seems best to thee
To take herein?—Poor are we : these bright stones
Would make us happier than the highest ones ;
Yet danger hangs thereby, nor have I yet
My living from dead corpses had to get ;
Nay, scarcely can I deem this Queen will be
At rest for long beneath the unquiet sea.
—How say’st thou, shall I go unto the King,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And tell him every word about the thing
E'en as I know it ? ”

“ Nay, nay, nay,” she said,
“ Certes but little do I fear the dead,
Yet think thou not to call the girdle thine ;
With a man's death doth every gem here shine—
Our deaths the first : but do thou bide at home,
And let the King hear what may even come
To a King's ears ; meddle thou not, nor make
With any such ; still shall the brass pot break
The earthen pot—a lord is thanked for what
A poor man often has in prison sat.
But down the beach run thou thy shallop straight,
And from the net take off the heaviest weight,
And do this belt about it ; and then go
And in the deepest of the green bay sow
This seed and fruit of love and wrath and crime,
And let this tale be dealt with by great time ;
But 'twixt the sea and the green southering hill
We will abide, peaceful if toilsome still.”

So was it done, and e'en as in her heart
Was hidden from all eyes her trait'rous part,
So the sea hid her heart from all but those,
Who, having passed through all eld's dreamy doze,
Died with their tale untold.

Time passed away,
And dimmer grew her name day after day ;
And the fair place, where erst her eyes had chilled
Sweet laughter into silence, now was filled

BELLEROPHON AT ARGOS

By folk who, midst of fair life slipping by,
No longer had her deeds in memory;
There where she once had dwelt mid hate and
 praise,
No smile, no shudder now her name could raise.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

THE night had fallen or ere the tale was done,
And on the hall-floor now the pale moon shone
In fitful gleams, for the snow fell no more,
But ragged clouds still streamed the pale sky o'er :
A while they sat, and seemed to hear the sea
Beat 'gainst the ice-glazed cliffs unceasingly,
Though nought belike that noise was but the wind
Caught in some corner, half blocked-up and blind
With the white drift :—just so the mournfulness
Of the tale told out did their hearts oppress
With seeming sorrow, for a glorious life
Twisted awry and crushed dead in the strife
Long ages past ; while yet more like it was
That with the old tale o'er their souls did pass
Shades of their own dead hopes, and buried pain
By measured words drawn from its grave again,
Though no more deemed a strange unheard-of thing
Made but for them ; as when their hearts did cling
To those dead hopes of things impossible,
While their tale's ending yet was left to tell.

JANUARY

STILL the hard frost griped all things bitterly,
And who of folk might now say when or why
The earth should change and spring come back again.
—Spring clean forgotten, as amidst his pain
Some hapless lover's chance unmeaning kiss
Given unto lips that never shall be his
In time long passed, ere bitter knowledge came,
And cherished love was grown a wrong and shame.
—Yet mid the dead swoon of the earth, the days
'Gan lengthen now, and on the hard-beat ways
No more the snow drave down; and, spite of all,
The goodman's thoughts must needs begin to fall
Upon the seed hid in the dying year,
And he must busy him about his gear;
And in the city, at the high noon, when
The faint sun glimmered, sat the ancient men,
With young folk gathered round about once more,
Who heeded not the east wind's smothered roar,
Since unto most of them for mere delight
Were most things made, the dull days and the bright;
And change was life to them, and death a tale
Little believed, that chiefly did avail
To quicken love and make a story sweet.

Now the old Swabian's glittering eyes did meet
A maiden's glance, who reddened at his gaze,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Whereon a pleasant smile came o'er his face,
As from his pouch a yellow book he drew
And spake :

“Of many things the wise man knew,
The man who wrote this ; many words he made
Of haps that still perchance for great are weighed
There in the East : how kings were born and died,
And how men lied to them, and how they lied,
And how they joyed in doing good and ill :
Now mid the great things that his book do fill,
Here is a tale, told, saith he, by a crone
At some grand feast forgotten long ago,
Which may perchance scarce be of much less worth
Than tales of deeds that reddened the green earth—
Fools' deeds of men, who well may be to you
As good as nameless, since ye never knew
The ways of those midst whom they lived erewhile,
And what their hearts deemed good, or nought, and
vile.”

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

ARGUMENT

THERE was a man in a certain great city who on his wedding-day unwittingly gave his spousal-ring to the Goddess Venus, and for this cause trouble came upon him, till in the end he got his ring back again.

THE story of this chronicle
Doth of an ancient city tell,
Well built upon a goodly shore ;
The wide lands stretched behind it bore
Great wealth of oil and wine and wheat ;
The great sea carried to its feet
The dainty things of many lands ;
There the hid miners' toiling hands
Dragged up to light the dull blue lead,
And silver white, and copper red,
And dreadful iron ; many a time
The sieves swung to the woman's rhyme
O'er gravelly streams that carried down
The golden sand from caves unknown ;
Dark basalt o'er the sea's beat stood,
And porphyry cliffs as red as blood ;
From the white marble quarries' edge

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Down to the sweeping river's sedge,
Sheep bore the web that was to be ;
The purple lay beneath the sea,
The madder waved in the light wind,
The woad-stalks did the peasant bind
That were to better his worn hood ;
And ever, amid all things good,
Least of all things this lucky land
Lacked for the craftsman's cunning hand.

So richer grew that city still
Through many a year of good and ill,
And when the white beasts drew the car
That bore their banner to the war,
From out the brazen gates enwrought
With many a dreamer's steadfast thought,
An hundred thousand men poured out
To shake the scared earth with their shout.

Now little will your wonder be
That mid so great prosperity
Enough there was of ill and sin ;
That many folk who dwelt therein
Lived evil lives from day to day,
Nor put their worst desires away.
But as in otherwise indeed
Of God's good pardon had they need,
And were herein as other folk,
So must they bear this added yoke,
That rife was wicked sorcery there ;
And why I know not ; if it were

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Wrought by a lingering memory
Of how that land was wont to be
A dwelling-place, a great stronghold
Unto the cozening gods of old.
It might be so ; but add thereto
That of all men life's sweets they knew,
That death to them was wholly bad,
So that perchance a hope they had
That yet another power there was
Than His who brought that death to pass.

Howe'er that may be, this I know,
That in that land men's lives were so
That they in trouble still must turn
Unholy things and strange to learn :
Had this man mid the infidel
A lost son, folk might buy and sell ;
Did that one fear to pass his life
With unrewarded love at strife ;
Or had he a long-missing keel ;
Or was he with the commonweal
In deadly strife ; or perchance laid
Abed, by fever long downweighed ;
Or were his riches well-nigh done ;—
Love, strife, or sickness, all was one,
This seemed the last resource to them,
To catch out at the strange-wrought hem
Of the dark gown that hid away
The highest ill from light of day.

Yea, though the word unspoken was,
And though each day the holy mass

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

At many an altar gold-arrayed
From out the painted book was said,
And though they doubted nought at all
Of how the day of days must fall
At last upon the earth, and range
All things aright that once seemed strange ;
Yet Evil seemed so great a thing
That 'neath its dusk o'ershadowing wing
They needs must cower down ; now at least
While half a god and half a beast
Man seemed ; some parley must they hold
With God's foe, nor be overbold
Before the threatening of a hand
Whose might they did not understand,
Though oftentimes they felt it sore :
And through this faithlessness, the more
Ill things had power there, as I deem,
Till some men's lives were like a dream,
Where nought in order can be set,
And nought worth thence the soul may get,
Or weigh one thing for what it is ;
Yea, at the best mid woe and bliss,
Some dreamlike day would come to most.

Now this great city still made boast
That, mid her merchants, men there were
Who e'en from kings the bell might bear
For wealth and honour : and I think
That no men richer wines might drink,
Were better housed, or braver clad,
Or more of all the world's joy had

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Than their rich men ; that no king's door
Could show forth greater crowds of poor,
Who lacked for bread and all things good,
Than in that land a merchant's could—
Yea, rich indeed 'mongst all were they.

Now on a certain summer day
One of their fairest palaces,
A paradise midst whispering trees,
Beyond its wont was bright and fair ;
Great feast did men get ready there,
Because its young lord, lately come
Back from the eastlands to his home,
That day should wed a lovely maid ;
He, for that tide too long delayed,
A lading of great rarities
Had brought to dazzle those sweet eyes ;
So had you wandered through the house
From hall to chamber amorous,
While in the minster church hard by,
Mid incense smoke and psalmody,
The gold-clad priest made one of twain,
So wandering had you tried in vain
To light on an uncomely thing ;
Such dyes as stain the parrot's wing,
The May-flowers or the evening sky,
Made bright the silken tapestry ;
And threaded pearls therein were wrought,
And emeralds from far eastlands brought
To deck the shapes of knight and king ;—
His maybe who of old did sing

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

God's praises 'twixt the shield and spear,
Or his the Trojan folk did fear.
Or from the silken mimicry
Of fair Cassandra might you see
Óileus the red ruby tear,
As he her snowy breast made bare ;
Since woe itself must there be sweet
For such a place to be made meet.

If such things hid the marble walls,
What wonder that the swift footfalls
Were dulled upon the marble floor
By silken webs from some far shore,
Whereon were pictured images
Of other beasts and other trees
And other birds than these men knew ;
That from the vaulted ceilings' blue
Stars shone like Danaë's coming shower,
Or that some deftly painted bower
Thence mocked the roses of that day ?

Full many a life had passed away,
And many a once young hand grown old,
Dealing with silk and gems and gold,
Through weary days and anxious nights,
That went to fashion those delights,
Which added now small bliss indeed
To those who pleasure had to meed
Upon a day when all were glad :
Yet when the Church all dues had had,
And the street, filled with minstrelsy,
Gave token of the twain anigh ;

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

When through the hall-doors, open wide,
Streamed in the damsels of the bride ;
When the tall brown-cheeked bridegroom came
Flushed with hot love and pride and shame,
And by the hand his love led on,
Who midst that glorious company shone
Like some piece of the pale moonlight
Cut off from quietness and night,—
Then all these dainty things in sooth
Seemed meet for such an hour of youth ;
And vain were words such joy to stay ;
And deathless seemed that little day,
And as a fitful hapless dream
The past and future well might seem.

What need to tell how sea and earth
Had been run through to make more mirth,
For folk already overglad—
What cunning pageants there they had ;
What old tales acted o'er again,
Where grief and death glad folk did feign,
Who deemed their own joy still would bide ;
What old songs sung wherein did hide
Meet meanings for that lovesome day ;
What singing of the bridal lay
By a fair, soft-voiced trembling maid,
Like to the goddess well arrayed,
Who, dreaded once, was grown to be
A pageant-maker's imagery ?
Why make long words of that sweet band
Who scattered flowers from slender hand,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And brought the garlands forth? How tell
What music on the feasters fell,
So sweet and solemn, that from mirth
O'erstrained well-nigh must tears have birth?—
Nay, let all pass, and deem indeed
That every joyance was their meed
Wherewith men cheat themselves to think
That they of endless joy may drink;
That every sense in turn must bear
Of o'er-sweet pleasure its full share,
Till for awhile the very best
They next might gain seemed utter rest,
And of some freshness were they fain.
So then the garden did they gain,
And wandered there by twos and threes
Amidst the flowers, or 'neath the trees,
Sat, keeping troublous thoughts at bay.

So fared they through the earlier day;
But when the sun did now decline,
And men grew graver for the wine
That erst such noble tales had told;
And maids no more were free and bold,
But reddened at the words half-said,
While round about the rebeck played;
Then needs must the feastmasters strive
Too pensive thoughts away to drive,
And make the sun go down with mirth
At least upon that spot of earth;
So did the minstrel men come in,
And tale-tellers the lay begin,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

And men by fabled woes were stirred,
Or smiling their own follies heard
Told of some other ; and withal
Here did the dice on table fall,
Here stout in arms the chess-king stood ;
There young men stirred their sluggish blood
With clattering sword and buckler play,
There others on the daisies lay
Above the moat, and watched their quill
Make circles in the water still,
Or laughed to see the damsel hold
Her dainty skirt enwrought with gold
Back from the flapping tench's tail,
Or to his close-set dusky mail
With gentle force brought laughingly
The shrinking finger-tip anigh.

Midst these abode a little knot
Of youths and maidens, on a spot
Fenced by a cloister of delight,
Well wrought of marble green and white ;
Wherein upon a wall of gold
Of Tristram was the story told,
Well done by cunning hands that knew
What form to man and beast was due ;
Midmost, upon a space of green,
Half shaded from the summer sheen,
Half with the afternoon sun thrown
Upon its daisies glittering strewn,
Was gathered that fair company
Wherewith the bridegroom chanced to be,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Who through the cloister door must gaze
From time to time 'thwart the sun's blaze
On to a shaded space of grass
Whereon his new-wed maiden was,
Harkening in seeming to a song
That told of some past love and wrong ;
But as he strained his ear to catch
Across the wind some louder snatch
Of the sweet tune, new-coming folk
The sweet sight hid, the music broke ;
Of these one maiden trimly girt
Bore in her gleaming upheld skirt
Fair silken balls sewed round with gold ;
Which when the others did behold
Men cast their mantles unto earth,
And maids within their raiments' girth
Drew up their gown-skirts, loosening here
Some button on their bosoms clear
Or slender wrists, there making tight
The laces round their ankles light ;
For folk were wont within that land
To cast the ball from hand to hand,
Dancing meanwhile full orderly ;
So now the bridegroom with a sigh,
Struggling with love's quick-gathering yoke,
Turned round unto that joyous folk,
And gat him ready for the play.

Lovely to look on was the sway
Of the slim maidens 'neath the ball
As they swung back to note its fall

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

With dainty balanced feet ; and fair
The bright outflowing golden hair,
As swiftly, yet in measured wise
One maid ran forth to gain the prize ;
Eyes glittered and young cheeks glowed bright,
And gold-shod foot, round limb and light,
Gleamed from beneath the girded gown
That, unrebuked, untouched, was thrown
Hither and thither by the breeze ;
Shrill laughter smote the thick-leaved trees,
Familiar names clear voices cried,
Sweet sound rose up as sweet sound died,
And still the circle spread and spread,
As folk to all that goodlihead
Kept thronging in, till they must stay
A little while the eager play,
And now, for very breathlessness,
With rest the trodden daisies bless.
So now against the wall some leaned,
Some from amidst the daisies gleaned
The yellow trefoil, and the blue
Faint speedwell in the shade that grew ;
Some panting sat and clasped their knees
With faces turned unto the breeze,
And midst them the new-comers stood,
With hair smooth yet and unstirred blood

Laurence, the bridegroom, as the game
Unto this tide of resting came,
Turned idle eyes about, and met

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

An image in the grey wall set,
A thing he knew from early days :
There in a gilded carven place
Queen Venus' semblance stood, more fair
Than women whom that day did bear,
And yet a marvel for the life
Wherewith its brazen limbs were rife.
Not in that country was she wrought,
Or in those days ; she had been brought
From a fair city far away,
Ruined e'en then for many a day ;
Full many a tale had there been told
Of him who once that Queen did mould,
And all of these were strange to hear,
And dreadful some, and full of fear.
And now as Laurence gazed upon
That beauty, in the old days won
He knew not from what pain and toil,
Vague fear new-risen seemed to spoil
The summer joy ; her loveliness
That hearts, long dead now, once did bless,
Grown dangerous, 'gan to lead his mind
On through a troublous maze and blind
Of unnamed thoughts, and silently,
With knitted brow, he drew anigh,
And midst the babbling close did gaze
Into the marvel of her face :
Till, with a sudden start, at last
His straying thoughts he seemed to cast
Aside, and laughed aloud, and said :

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

“O cold and brazen goodlihead,
How lookest thou on those that live?
Thou who, tales say, wert wont to strive
On earth, in heaven, and 'neath the earth,
To wrap all in thy net of mirth,
And drag them down to misery
Past telling—and didst thou know why?—
And what has God done with thee then,
That thou art perished from midst men
E'en as the things thou didst destroy,
Thy Paris and thy town of Troy,
And many a man and maid and town?
How is thy glory fallen adown,
That I, even I, must sigh for thee!”

So spake he, as the minstrelsy
Struck up once more a joyous strain,
And called them to the play again;
And therewithal he looked about,
In answer to the merry shout
That called on him by name to turn.
But even therewith the sun did burn
Upon his new-gained spousal-ring—
A wondrous work, a priceless thing,
Whereon, 'neath mulberries white and red,
And green leaves, lay fair Thisbe dead
By her dead love; the low sun's blaze
It caught now, and he fell to gaze
Thereon, and said at last:

“Perchance
The ball might break it in the dance,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And that an ugly omen were ;
Nay, one to ward it well is here.
Thou, Goddess, that heardst Thisbe's vow,
From blind eyes gaze upon her now
Till I return mine own to claim ;
And as thou mayst, bear thou the shame
Of being the handmaid to my love ;
Full sure I am thou wilt not move."

Know that this image there did stand
With arm put forth and open hand,
As erst on Ida triumphing ;
And now did Laurence set the ring
On the fourth finger fair and straight,
And laughing, "Thou mayst bear the weight,"
Turned back again unto the play.

To him slow passed the time away ;
But when at last in purple shade
'Twixt wall and wall the grass was laid,
And he grew gladder therewithal,
Then weariness on folk 'gan fall ;
The fifes left off their dancing tune,
And sang of lovers fain of June,
And thence that company 'gan go
By twos and threes with footsteps slow,
Pensive at end of mirthful day ;
But from them Laurence turned away
Unto the carven dame, to take
The ring he wore for true-love's sake ;—
Daylight it was, though broad and red

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

The sun was grown, and shadows led
Eastward with long lines o'er the grass—
—Daylight, but what had come to pass?

Near by those voices still he heard
In laugh and talk and careless word ;
Upon his cheek the wind blew cold ;
His own fair house he did behold
Changed nowise ; from the little close
The scent of trodden grass arose—
How could it be a dream?—Yet there
She stood, the moveless image fair,
The little-noticed, oft-seen thing,
With hand fast closed upon his ring.

At first, in agony and haste,
A frantic minute did he waste
In pulling at the brazen hand,
That was as firm as rocks that stand
The day-long beating of the sea ;
Then did he reel back dizzily,
And gaze at sky and earth and trees
Once more, as asking words from these
To ravel out his tale for him.
But now as they were waxing dim
Before his eyes, he heard his name
Called out, and therewith fear of shame
Brought back his heart and made him man.
Unto his fellows, pale and wan,
He turned, who, when they saw him so,
What thing might ail him fain would know,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

For wild and strange he looked indeed ;
Then stammered he, "Nay, nought I need
But wine, in sooth : John, mind'st thou not
How on the steaming shore and hot
Of Serendib a sting I gat
From some unseen worm, as we sat
Feasting one eve? Well, the black folk
E'en saved my life from that ill stroke,
By leech-craft ; yet they told me then
I oft should feel that wound again,
Till I had fifty years or more :
This is a memory of that shore ;
A thing to be right soon forgot."
And to himself, "If this is not
An empty dream, a cutting file
My ring therefrom shall soon beguile,
When, at the ending of the day,
These wearying guests have gone away."

Now unto supper all folk turned,
And 'neath the torches red gold burned,
And the best pageants of the day
Swept through the hall and said their say,
Departing e'en as men's lives go :
But though to Laurence slow and slow
Those hours must needs seem, none the less
He gave himself to mirthfulness,
At least in seeming ; till at last
All guests from out the palace passed.
And now the short soft summer night
Was left at peace for their delight ;

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

But Laurence, muffled up and hid,
Shrinking, betwixt his servants slid,
For now he had a little space
To come unto that mystic place,
Where still his ring he thought to see.
A file and chisel now had he,
And weighty hammer; yet withal
As he drew toward the cloister-wall,
Well-nigh he called himself a fool,
To go with cloak and blacksmith's tool,
And lay hard blows upon a dream;
For now in sooth he nigh must deem
His eyes had mocked him; reaching soon
That cloister by the broad high moon
He hurried through the door, and heard
All round the sound of June's brown bird
Above the voices of the night;
Trembling, he sprang into the light
Through the black arches of the place,
And stealing on stood face to face
With the old smiling image there,
And lowered to her fingers fair
His troubled, wild, and shrinking eyes,
And stretched his hand out to the prize:—
His eyes, his hand, were there in vain.

Once more, as sure of coming gain,
As erst in Ida she did stand,
So stood she now; her open hand,
That late he saw closed round the ring,
Empty and bare of anything:

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Gaping awhile he stood, for fear
Now made him think a voice to hear,
And see her change soon, and depart
From out their midst; but gathering heart,
He muttered, "Yet, what have I seen?
Should it not even thus have been,
If the closed hand were but a dream?
Of some guest worser must I deem;
Go, fool; thine own love waiteth thee."
Therewith he went, yet fearfully
Looked o'er his shoulder on the way,
And terror on his heart still lay.

Yet to his chamber at the last
He came, and to the floor he cast
His wrapping mantle, and alone
He strove to think of all things done,
And strove once more to bring again
The longing sweet, the joy and pain
That on that morn he called desire;
For wretched fear had dulled that fire:
And, whereas erewhile he had deemed
That life was joy, and it had seemed
A never-ending game to be,
A fair and rich eternity
Before him, now was it indeed
A troublous fight, where he should need
Help on the left hand and the right,
Nor yet so 'scape the certain night.

But mid these thoughts he heard withal
The chamberlain to pages call,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

To bear the bridal wine to him ;
And as he might he strove to dim
His anxious thought, and with a smile
The coming curious eyes beguile.
They entered now, and whiles that he
Drank from the gold cup feverishly,
The minstrels, ere his draught was done,
Struck up *The King of England's Son*,
And soon amid that ordered word
The lessening sound of feet he heard,
And then the song itself did die.
But from the bridechamber near by
Now for a space rose clear and sweet
The damsels' song, *Fair Marguerite* ;
And when that ended all was still,
And he with strained, divided will,
Trembling with love, yet pale with fear,
To the bridechamber door drew near,
Muttering some well-remembered charm
That erst had kept his soul from harm,
Yet misty seemed the place ; the wall—
Its woven waters seemed to fall,
Its trees, its beasts, its loom-wrought folk,
Now seemed indeed as though they woke,
And moved unto him as he went.
The room seemed full of some strange scent ;
And strains of wicked songs he heard,
And half-said God-denying word :
He reeled, and cried aloud, and strove
To gain the door that hid his love ;
It seemed to him that, were he there,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

All would again be calm and fair.
But in the way before his eyes
A cloudy column seemed to rise,
Cold, odorous, impalpable,
And a voice cried, "*I love thee well,
And thou hast loved me ere to-night,
And longed for this o'ergreat delight,
And had no words therefor to pray.
Come, have thy will, and cast away
Thy foolish fear, thy foolish love,
Since me at least thou canst not move,
Now thou with ring hast wedded me :
Come, cast the hope away from thee
Wherewith unhappy brooding men
Must mock their threescore years and ten ;
Come, thou that mockest me, I live !
How with my beauty canst thou strive ?
Unhappy if thou couldst ! for see
What depth of joy there is in me !*"

Then round about him closed the mist ;
It was as though his lips were kissed,
His body by soft arms embraced,
His fingers lovingly enlaced
By other fingers ; until he
Midst darkness his own ring did see.

Nought else awhile ; then back there came
New vision : as amidst white flame,
The flower-girt goddess wavered there,
Nor knew he now where they twain were,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Midst wild desire that nigh did rend
His changed heart ; then there came an end
Of all that light and ecstasy ;
His soul grew blind, his eyes could see ;
And, moaning from an empty heart,
He saw the hangings blown apart
By the night wind, the lights flare red
In the white light the high moon shed
O'er all the place he knew so well,
And senseless on the floor he fell.

AH, what a night to what a morn !
Ah, what a morrow black with scorn,
And hapless end of happy love !
What shame his helpless shame to prove !
For who, indeed, alone could bear
The dreadful shame, the shameful fear,
Of such a bridal ? Think withal,
More trusted such a tale would fall
Upon those folks' ears than on most,
Who, as I said erst, saw a host
Of wild things lurking in the night ;
To whom was magic much as right
As prayers or holy psalmody.

So nothing else it seemed might be,
When Laurence for three nights had striven
To gain the fair maid to him given,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But that her sire should know the thing
And help him with his counselling.
So, weary, wasted with his shame,
Unto his house the bridegroom came,
And when the twain were left alone
He told him how the thing had gone.
The old man doubted not the sooth
Of what he said, but, touched with ruth,
Yet spent no time in mourning vain.

“Son,” said he, “idle were the pain
To seek if thou some deed hast wrought
Which on thine head this grief hath brought—
Some curse for which this doth atone,
Some laugh whereby is honour gone
From the dread powers unnameable ;
Rather, who now can help thee well ? ”

“Small heed, my father,” Laurence said,
“Gave I to such things, and small dread
To anything I could not see,
But it were God who fashioned me :
From witch-wives have I bought ere now
Wind-bags indeed, but yet did trow
Nothing therein, but dealt with these
My shipmen’s clamour to appease.”

“Well,” said he, “that perchance is worse
For thee, yea, may have gained this curse.
But come, I know a certain man
Who in these things great marvels can,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

And something of an age are we,
Yoke-fellows in astronomy—
A many years ago, alas ! ”

So therewithal the twain did pass
Toward the great church, and entered there,
And, going 'twixt the pillars fair,
Came to a chapel, where a priest
Made ready now the Holy Feast :
“ Hist,” said the old man, “ there he is ;
May he find healing for all this !
Kneel down, and note him not too much,
No easy man he is to touch.”

So down upon the floor of stone
They knelt, until the mass was done,
Midst peasant folk, and sailors' wives,
Sore careful for their husbands' lives ;
But when the mass was fully o'er
They made good haste unto the door
That led unto the sacristy :
And there a ring right fair to see
The old man to a verger gave
In token, praying much to have
With Dan Palumbus speech awhile :
The verger took it with a smile,
As one who says, “ Ye ask in vain ; ”
But presently he came again,
And said, “ Fair sir, come hither then,
The priest will see you of all men ! ”

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

With eyes made grave by their intent
From out the lordly church they went
Into the precinct, and withal
They passed along the minster wall,
And heard amidst the buttresses
The grey hawks chatter to the breeze,
The sanctus bell run down the wind ;
Until the priest's house did they find,
Built 'neath the belfry huge and high,
Fluttered about perpetually
By chattering daws, and shaken well
From roof to pavement, when the bell
Flung out its sound o'er night or day.

“Sirs, Dan Palumbus takes his way
E'en now from out the sacristy,”
The verger said, “sirs, well be ye !
For time it is that I were gone.”
Therewith he left the twain alone
Beside the door, and, sooth to say,
In haste he seemed to get away
As one afeard ; but they bode there,
And round about the house did peer,
But found nought dreadful : small it was,
Set on a tiny plot of grass,
And on each side the door a bay
Brushed 'gainst the oak porch rent and grey ;
A yard-wide garden ran along
The wall, by ancient box fenced strong ;
And in the corner, where it met
The belfry, was a great yew set,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Where sat the blackbird-hen in spring,
Hearkening her bright-billed husband sing.
A peaceful place it should have been
For one who of the world had seen
O'er much, and quiet watch would keep
Over his soul awaiting sleep.

But now they heard the priest draw nigh,
And saw him and his shadow high
Wind round the wind-worn buttresses ;
So coming by the last of these
He met them face to face : right tall
He was ; his straight black hair did fall
About his shoulders ; strong he seemed,
His eyes looked far off, as he dreamed
Of other things than what they saw ;
Strange lines his thin pale face did draw
Into a set wild look of pain
And terror. As he met the twain
He greeted well his ancient friend,
And prayed them within doors to wend.
Small was his chamber ; books were there
Right many, and in seeming fair.
But who knows what therein might be
'Twixt board and board of beechen tree ?

Palumbus bade them sit, and sat,
And talked apace of this and that,
Nor heeded that the youth spake wild,
Nor that his old friend coughed and smiled,
As ill at ease, while the priest spake,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Then from his cloak a purse did take,
And at the last pushed in his word
Edgewise, as 'twere. Palumbus heard
As one who fain had been born deaf,
Then rose and cried, "Thou fill'st the sheaf,
Thou fill'st the sheaf! this is my doom,
Well may the sexton make my tomb!"
And up and down he walked, muttering,
'Twixt closed teeth, many a nameless thing.

At last he stopped and said, "O ye,
I knew that ye would come to me,
And offer me great store of gold:
Full often good help have I sold,
And thus this tide should I have done;
But on this mountain of grey stone
I stood last night, and in my art
I dealt; and terror filled my heart,
And hope, and great uncertainty;
Therefore I deem that I shall die;
For cool and bold erst have I been,
Whatever I have heard and seen;
But the old Master of my fear
Seems afar now, and God grown near;
And soon I look to see his face.
Therefore, if but a little space,
Would I be on his side, and do
A good deed; all the more for you;
Since ye are part of sweet days, friend,
That once we deemed would never end;
And in thine eyes meseems, O youth,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Kindness I see and hope and truth ;
And thou and he may speak a word
For me unto my master's Lord :—
Well, I must reap that I did sow—
But take your gold again and go :
And thou for six days fast and pray,
And come here on the seventh day
About nightfall ; then shalt thou learn
In what way doth the matter turn,
And fully know of time and place,
And be well armed thy foe to face.”

So homeward doubtful went the twain,
And Laurence spent in fear and pain
The six long days ; and so at last,
When the seventh sun was well-nigh past,
Came to that dark man's fair abode ;
The grey tower with the sunset glowed,
The daws wheeled black against the sky
About the belfry windows high,
Or here and there one sank adown
The dizzy shaft of panelled stone ;
And sound of children nigh the close
Was mingled with the cries of those ;
And e'en as Laurence laid his hand
Upon the latch, and there did stand
Lingering a space, most startling clear
The sweet chime filled the evening air.
He entered mid the great bell's drone,
And found Palumbus all alone
Mid books laid open :

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“Rest,” said he ;
“Time presses not for thee or me :
Surely shall I die soon enow.”
Silent, with hands laid to his brow,
He sat then, nor did Laurence speak,
Fearing perchance some spell to break ;
At last the priest caught up a book,
And from its leaves a letter took,
And unknown words there were on it
For superscription duly writ,
And sealed it was in solemn wise.
He said :

“Thou knowest where there lies
Five leagues hence, or a little less,
North of the town, a sandy ness
That shipmen call St. Clement’s Head ;
South of it dreary land and dead
Lies stretched now, and the sea bears o’er
Ruin of shingle evermore,
And saps the headland year by year,
And long have husbandmen had fear
Of its short-lived and treacherous soil,
And left it free from any toil.
There, with thy face turned toward the land,
At the hill’s foot take thou thy stand,
Just where the turf the shingle meets,
Wherewith the sea the marshland eats ;
But seaward if thy face thou turn,
What I have learned then shalt thou learn
With like reward—watch carefully
And well, and a strange company

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Shall pass thee as thou standest there,
And heed thee not—some foul some fair,
Some glad some sorry ; rule thy heart,
And heed them nothing for thy part,
Till at the end of all thou seest
A great lord on a marvellous beast
Unnameable ; on him cry out,
And he thereon shall turn about
And ask thy need ; have thou no fear,
But give him what I give thee here,
And let him read, and thou shalt win
Thine happiness, and have no sin.
But as for me, be witness thou
That in the scroll I give thee now,
My death lies, and I know it well,
And cry to God against his hell.”

In languid voice he spake as one,
Who knows the task that must be done,
And how each word from him should fall
And gives no heed to it at all ;
But here he stopped a little space,
And once more covered up his face ;
But soon began his speech again
In a soft voice, and freed from pain :

“ And for the folk that thou shalt see,
Whence cometh all that company,—
Marvel thou not thereat, for know
That this is sure ; long years ago,
Leagues seaward of that barren place,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The temple of a glorious race,
Built with far mightier walls than these,
Stood fair midst groves of whispering trees.
Thence come these folk remembering
Their glory, once so great a thing—
I have said: Could they be once more
As they have been,—but all is o'er,
What matters what is, what has been,
And what shall be, when I have seen
The last few hours of my last day?—
Depart.—Ah me, to cast away
Such power as I on earth have had!
I who could make the lover glad
Above his love's dead face,—at least
A little while—now has all ceased
With that small scrap of black and white:
Think of me, God, midst thy delight,
And save me! yea, or do thy will!
For thou too hast beheld my skill."

The scroll did Laurence hold in hand,
And silent he a space did stand,
Gazing upon Palumbus, who
Sat open-eyed, as though he knew
Nought of what things were round about;
So, stealthily, and in great doubt
Of strange things yet to come to pass,
Did Laurence gain the darkening grass,
And through the precinct and the town
He passed, and reached the foreshores brown,
And gathered heart, and as he might

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Went boldly forward through the night.
At first on his left hand uprose
Great cliffs and sheer, and, rent from those,
Boulders strewn thick across the strand,
Made weary work for foot and hand ;
But well he knew the path indeed,
And scarce of such light had he need
As still the summer eve might shed
From the high stars or sunset dead.
Soft was the lovely time and fair,
A little sea-wind raised his hair,
That seemed as though from heaven it blew.
All sordid thoughts the sweet time slew,
And gave good hope such welcoming,
That presently he 'gan to sing,
Though still amid the quiet night
He could not hear his song aright
For the grave thunder of the sea
That smote the beach so musically,
And in the dim light seemed so soft
As each great wave was raised aloft
To fall in foam, you might have deemed
That waste of ocean was but dreamed,
And that the surf's strong music was
By some unknown thing brought to pass ;
And Laurence, singing as he went,
As in some lower firmament,
Beneath the line that marked where met
The world's roof and the highway wet,
Could see a ship's light gleam afar
Scarce otherwise than as a star,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

While o'erhead fields of thin white cloud
The more part of the stars did shroud.

So on he went, and here and there
A few rough fisher-carles there were,
Launching their ordered keels to sea,
Eager to gain, if it might be,
The harbour-mouth with morning light,
Or else some bird that flies by night
Wheeled round about with his harsh cry ;
Or as the cliffs sank he could spy
Afar some homestead glittering
With high feast or some other thing.
Such gleams of fellowship had he
At first along the unquiet sea,
But when a long way off the town
The cliffs were wholly sunken down,
And on the marshland's edge he went,
For all sounds then the night-jar sent
Its melancholy laugh across
The sea-wind moaning for the loss
Of long-drowned lands, that in old time
Were known for great in many a clime.

But the moon rose, and 'neath its light,
Cloud-barred, the wide wastes came in sight,
With gleaming, sand-choked, reed-clad pools,
And marsh lights for the mock of fools ;
And o'er the waste beneath the moon
The sea-wind piped a dreary tune,
And louder grew, and the world then

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

No more seemed made for sons of men,
And summer seemed an empty name,
And harvest-time a mock and shame :
Such hopeless ruin seemed settled there,
On acres sunny once and fair.

But Laurence now could well behold
The sandy headland bare and bold
Against the sea, and stayed his feet
Awhile, to think how he should meet
These nameless things, his enemies,
The lords of terror and disease ;
Then trembling, hastened on, for thought
Full many an image to him brought,
Once seen, with loathing cast aside,
But ready e'en for such a tide,
Come back with longing's added sting,
And whatso horrors time could bring.

Now thrusting all these thoughts apart
He hastened on with hardy heart,
Till on the doubtful place he stood
Where the sea sucked the pasture's blood.
And with back turned unto the sea
He strove to think right strenuously
Of this and that well-liking place ;
The merry clamour of the chase,
Pageant of soldier or of priest,
Or market-place or crowded feast,
Or splintered spears for ladies' sake,
Until he 'gan to dream awake :
Then, midst of all his striving, still

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

His happiest thoughts must turn to ill,
As in a fevered, restless dream.
He thought about some flowery stream,
Himself in gilded boat thereon—
A livid cloud came o'er the sun,
A great wave swept from bank to bank ;
Or flower-crowned amid friends he drank,
And as he raised the red wine up
Fell poison shrieked from out the cup ;
The garland when his heart was full
He set upon a fleshless skull ;
The lute turned to a funeral bell,
The golden door led down to hell.
Then back from dreams his soul he brought,
And of his own ill matters thought,
And found his fear the lesser grew
When all his heart therein he threw.

Yet awful was the time indeed,
And of good heart sore had he need :
The wind's moan louder than before,
Some wave cast higher up the shore,
The night-bird's brushing past his head,—
All little things grew full of dread ;
Yet did he waver nought at all,
Or turn, for whatso thing might fall.

The moon was growing higher now,
The east wind had been strong to blow
The night sky clear from vexing cloud,
And in the west his flock did crowd ;

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Sharper things grew beneath the light,
As with a false dawn, thin and bright
The hornéd poppies' blossoms shone
Upon a shingle-bank, thrust on
By the high tide to choke the grass;
And nigh it the sea-holly was,
Whose cold grey leaves and stiff stark shade
On earth a double moonlight made:
Above him, specked with thorn and whin,
And clad with short grey grass and thin,
The hill ran up, and Laurence knew
That down the other slope there grew
A dark pine-wood, whose added sound
Scarce noted, yet did more confound,
With changing note, his wearied mind.

But now with drowsiness grown blind,
Once more he tottered on his place,
And let fall down his weary face;
But then remembering all his part,
Once and again woke with a start,
And dozed again; and then at last,
Shuddering, all slumber from him cast,
Yet scarce knew if he lived or no:
For by his scared wild eyes did go
A wondrous pageant, noiselessly,
Although so close it passed him by;
The fluttering raiment by him brushed,
As through its folds the sea-wind rushed.

By then his eyes were opened wide.
Already up the grey hill-side

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The backs of two were turned to him :
One like a young man tall and slim,
Whose heels with rosy wings were dight ;
One like a woman clad in white,
With glittering wings of many a hue,
Still changing, and whose shape none knew.
In after time would Laurence say,
That though the moonshine, cold and grey,
Flooded the lonely earth that night,
These creatures in the moon's despite
Were coloured clear, as though the sun
Shone through the earth to light each one,
And terrible was that to see.

But while he stood, and shudderingly
Still gazed on those departing twain,
Yet 'gan to gather heart again,
A noise like echoes of a shout
Seemed in the cold air all about,
And therewithal came faint and thin
What seemed a far-off battle's din,
And on a sight most terrible
His eyes in that same minute fell,—
The images of slaughtered men,
With set eyes and wide wounds, as when
Upon the field they first lay slain ;
And those who there had been their bane
With open mouths as if to shout,
And frightful eyes of rage and doubt,
And hate that never more should die.
Then went the shivering fleers by,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

With death's fear ever in their eyes ;
And then the heaped-up fatal prize,
The blood-stained coin, the unset gem,
The gold robe torn from hem to hem,
The headless, shattered golden God,
The dead priest's crushed divining-rod ;
The captives, weak from blow and wound,
Toiling along ; the maiden, bound
And helpless, in her raiment torn ;
The ancient man's last day forlorn :
Onward they pressed, and though no sound
Their footfalls made upon the ground,
Most real indeed they seemed to be.
The spilt blood savoured horribly,
Heart-breaking the dumb writhings were,
Unuttered curses filled the air ;
Yea, as the wretched band went past,
A dreadful look one woman cast
On Laurence, and upon his breast
A wounded blood-stained hand she pressed.

But on the heels of these there came
A King, that through the night did flame,
For something more than steel or brass
The matter of his armour was ;
Its fashion strange past words to say ;
Who knows where first it saw the day ?
On a red horse he rode ; his face
Gave no more hope of any grace
Than through the blackness of the night
The swift-descending lightning might ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And yet therein great joy indeed
The brightness of his eyes did feed ;—
A joy as of the leaping fire
Over the house-roof rising higher
To greet the noon-sun, when the glaive
Forbids all folk to help or save.

Yet harmless this one passed him by,
And through the air deliciously
Faint pensive music breathed, and then
There came a throng of maids and men—
A young and fair and gentle band ;
Whereof some passed him hand in hand,
Some side by side not touching walked,
As though of happy things they talked ;
Noiseless they were like all the rest
As past him up the hill they pressed ;
Yet she who brushed by him most close
Cast to his feet a fresh red rose.

Then somewhat of a space there was
Before the next band 'gan to pass,
So faint they moved for very woe ;
And these were men and maids also,
And young were most, and most were fair ;
And hand in hand some few went there,
And still were fain with love to see
Each other's bitter misery ;
But most, just sundered, went along,
With faces drawn by hidden wrong,
Clenched hands and muttering lips that cursed

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

From brooding hearts their sin that nursed.
And she that went the last of all,
Black-robed, in passing by let fall
At Laurence's feet a black-bound wreath
Of bitter herbs long come to death.

Alone, afoot, when these were gone,
A bright one came, whose garments shone
In wondrous wise ; a bow he bore,
And deadly feathered shafts good store ;
Winged was he and most godlike fair ;
Slowly he went, and oft would stare
With eyes distraught down on the grass,
As waiting what might come to pass ;
Then whiles would he look up again,
And set his teeth as if with pain ;
And whiles for very joy of heart
His eyes would gleam, his lips would part
With such a smile as though the earth
Were newly made to give him mirth ;
Back o'er his shoulder would he gaze
Seaward, or through the marshland haze
That lay before, strain long and hard,
Till fast the tears fell on the sward :—
So towards the hill's brow wandered he.

Then through the moaning of the sea
There came a faint and thrilling strain,
Till Laurence strove with tears in vain,
And his flesh trembled, part with fear,
Part as with some great pleasure near,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And then his dazzled eyes could see
Once more a noiseless company ;
And his heart failed him at the sight,
And he forgot both wrong and right,
And nothing thought of his intent ;
For close before him now there went
Fair women clad in ancient guise
That hid but little from his eyes
More loveliness than earth doth hold
Now, when her bones are growing old ;
But all too swift they went by him,
And fluttering gown and ivory limb
Went twinkling up the bare hill-side,
And lonely there must he abide.

Then seaward had he nigh turned round,
And thus the end of life had found,
When even before his wildered sight
There glided forth a figure white,
And passed him by afoot, alone ;
No raiment on her sweet limbs shone,
Only the tresses of her hair
The wind drove round her body fair ;
No sandals were there on her feet,
But still before them blossoms sweet
Unnamed, unknown within that land,
Sprang up ; she held aloft her hand
As to the trembling man she turned
Her glorious eyes, and on it burned
The dreadful pledge, the looked-for thing,
The well-wrought, lovely spousal ring.

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Then Laurence trembled more and more ;
Huge longing his faint heart swept o'er,
As one who would a boon beseech.
His fevered hand forth did he reach,
And then she stayed and gazed at him,
Just moving lightly each fair limb
As one who loiters, but must go ;
But even as the twain stood so,
She saying nought, he saying nought,
And who knows what wild wave of thought
Beating betwixt them, from his girth
The dread scroll loosened fell to earth,
And to his ears where sounds waxed dim
Louder its rustle seemed to him
Than loudest thunder ; down he bent,
Remembering now his good intent,
And got the scroll within his hand ;
And when mid prayers he came to stand
Upright again, then was she gone,
And he once more was left alone.

Foredone, bewildered, downcast now,
Heard he confused clamour grow,
And then swept onward through the night
A babbling crowd in raiment bright,
Wherein none listened aught at all
To what from other lips might fall,
And none might meet his fellow's gaze ;
And still o'er every restless face
Passed restless shades of rage and pain,
And sickening fear and longing vain.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

On wound that manifold agony
Unholpen, vile, till earth and sea
Grew silent, till the moonlight died
Before a false light blaring wide,
And from amidst that fearful folk
The Lord of all the pageant broke.

Most like a mighty king was he,
And crowned and sceptered royally ;
As a white flame his visage shone,
Sharp, clear-cut as a face of stone ;
But flickering flame, not flesh, it was ;
And over it such looks did pass
Of wild desire, and pain, and fear,
As in his people's faces were,
But tenfold fiercer : furthermore,
A wondrous steed the Master bore,
Unnameable of kind or make,
Not horse, nor hippogriff, nor drake,
Like and unlike to all of these,
And flickering like the semblances
Of an ill dream, wrought as in scorn
Of sunny noon, fresh eve, and morn,
That feed the fair things of the earth.
And now brake out a mock of mirth
From all that host, and all their eyes
Were turned on Laurence in strange wise,
Who met the maddening fear that burned
Round his unholpen heart, and turned
Unto the dreadful king and cried :
“ What errand go ye on ? Abide,

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Abide! for I have tarried long;
Turn thou to me, and right my wrong!
One of thy servants keeps from me
That which I gave her not; nay, see
What thing thy Master bids thee do!"

Then wearily, as though he knew
How all should be, the Master turned,
And his red eyes on Laurence burned,
As without word the scroll he took;
But as he touched the skin he shook
As though for fear, and presently
In a great voice he 'gan to cry:
"Shall this endure for ever, Lord?
Hast thou no care to keep thy word?
And must such double men abide?
Not mine, not mine, nor on thy side?
For as thou cursest them I curse:—
Make thy souls better, Lord, or worse!"

Then spake he to the trembling man,
"What I am bidden, that I can;
Bide here, and thou shalt see thine own
Unto thy very feet cast down;
Then go and dwell in peace awhile."
Then round he turned with sneering smile,
And once more lonely was the night,
And colourless with grey moonlight.

But soon indeed the dawn drew near,
As Laurence stood 'twixt hope and fear,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Still doubting, now that all was gone,
If his own heart the thing had done,
Though on his coat the blood-mark was,
Though rose and wreath lay on the grass ;
So long he waited wearily,
Until, when dawn 'gan stripe the sky,
If he were waking scarce he knew,
When, as he deemed, a white cloud drew
Anigh him from the marshland grey,
Over the empty ghost-trod way,
And from its midst a voice there came :
*“ Thou who hast wrought me added shame,
Take back thine own and go thy ways ;
And think, perchance, in coming days,
When all grows old about thee, how
From foolish hands thou needs must throw
A gift of unhoped great delight.”*
It vanished as the east grew bright,
And in the shadowless still morn
A sense of rest to him was born,
And looking down unto his feet,
His eyes the spousal-ring did meet.
He caught it up with a glad cry,
And kissed it over longingly,
And set it on his hand again ;
And dreamlike now, and vague and vain,
Seemed all those images of fear,
The wicked sights that held him there ;
And rather now his eyes could see
Her that was his now verily.

THE RING GIVEN TO VENUS

Then from that dread unhallowed place
With merry heart he set his face.
A light wind o'er the ocean blew,
And fresh and fair the young day grew ;
The sun rose o'er the green sea's rim,
And gave new life and joy to him ;
The white birds crying o'er his head
Seemed praising all his hardihead,
And laughing at the worsted foe ;
So, joyous, onward did he go,
And in a little sheltered bay
His weariness he washed away,
And made afresh on toward the town :
He met the fish-wife coming down
From her red cottage to the strand,
The fisher-children hand in hand
Over some wonder washed ashore ;
The old man muttering words of lore
About the wind that was to be ;
And soon the white sails specked the sea,
And fisher-keel on fisher-keel
The furrowed sand again did feel,
And round them many a barefoot maid
The burden on her shoulders laid,
While unto rest the fishers went,
And grumbling songs from rough throats sent.

Now all is done, and he at last,
Weary, but full of joy, has passed
Over his threshold once again,
And scarce believed is all the pain

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And all the fear that he has had,
Now night and day shall make him glad.

As for Palumbus, tossed about
His soul might be in dread and doubt,
In rest at least his body lay
Ere the great bell struck noon that day.
And soon a carver did his best
To make an image of that rest,
Nor aught of gold did Laurence spare
To make his tomb both rich and fair ;
And o'er his clasped hands and his head
Thereafter many a mass was said.

JANUARY

SO when the tale was clean done, with a smile
The old priest looked around a little while,
That grew, as young and old 'gan say their say
On that strange dream of time long passed away ;
So listening, with his pleased and thoughtful look
He 'gan turn o'er the worn leaves of his book,
Half noting at the first the flowers therein,
Drawn on the margin of the yellowing skin
Where chapters ended ; or fair images
Of kings and lords amidst of war and peace
At books' beginnings ; till within a space
His eyes grew fixed upon a certain place,
And he seemed reading. Was it then the name
Of some old town before his eyes that came,
And drew his thoughts there ? Did he see it now ?
The bridge across the river choked with snow ;
The pillared market-place, not thronged this eve ;
The muffled goodwives making haste to leave
The gusty minster porch, whose windows shone
With the first-litten candles ; while the drone
Of the great organ shook the leaded panes,
And the wind moaned about the turret vanes ?
—Nought changed there, and himself so changed mid
change,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

That the next land—Death's land—would seem nought
strange

To his awakening eyes !

Ah ! good and ill,

When will your strife the fated measure fill ?

When will the tangled veil be drawn away,

To show us all that unimagined day ?